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LIGHTS OF 'IRFÁN

Book Eighteen



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Papers Presented at the 'Irfán
Colloquia and Seminars

Book Eighteen



Lights of ‘Irfán

Studies in the Principal Bahá’í Beliefs

*Papers Presented at the
‘Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*



Book Eighteen



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

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 48

Table of Contents

Preface.....	3
An Inquiry on the Role of Religion in Wealth and Poverty Hooshmand Badee	5
Biblical References in Tablets of the Divine Plan JoAnn Borovicka.....	31
Bahá'u'lláh and the Luminous Mind: Bahá'í Gloss on a Buddhist Puzzle Roland Faber.....	53
Themes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's <i>Tablets of The Divine Plan</i> Illustrated by Scriptural References to the Bible and the Qur'án Lameh Fananapazir	107
Grand Narratives and the Bahá'í Writings Ian Kluge	215
Nietzsche and the Bahá'í Writings: A First Look Ian Kluge	351
"Some Answered Questions" and Its Compiler Baharieh Rouhani Ma`ani	425
A Comparison between the Commentary and Interpretation of an Islamic Tradition by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Ayatu'llah Khomeini Moojan Momen	453
In the Presence of the Beloved: Bahá'u'lláh's <i>Lawḥ-i-Liqá'</i> : A Revised Provisional Translation and Notes Nima Rafiei.....	471
Poetry in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings and Utterances Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani.....	491
Appendices	
Bibliography of Writings and Abbreviations used in this book	529
Contents of <i>Lights of 'Irfán</i> Books 1-17	531
Publications of the 'Irfán Colloquium	545
Distributors of 'Irfán Publications	546
Vision and Aims of the 'Irfán Colloquium	547

Preface

We have received a rich collection of divinely revealed words. Bahá'u'lláh refers to that collection as an ocean containing precious pearls of meanings and mysteries hidden in its depth. He repeatedly calls upon each one of the believers to dive deeply in this ocean and try to discover and extract those pearls. This is a spiritual obligation for each individual believer. By making it an individual obligation, He has made such efforts a permanent activity at all times. The beauty of this unprecedented, collective, and continuing endeavor is that it releases such studies from the monopoly of a selected few and opens the door to everyone for such undertaking. Since the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes of people are different and their experiences are constantly changing in quality and quantity, the end results of such studies will be an immense, diverse, and endless body of spiritual knowledge. It will be a collective effort that each individual member will benefit from its outcome. This process releases us from religious rigidity, and stagnation, and generates vitality in our understanding and beliefs. 'Irfán Colloquia and the *Lights of 'Irfán* are facilities for support and promotion of such endeavors.

The present volume includes articles employing a variety of approaches in discovering the pearls of knowledge and meanings from the ocean of Bahá'í sacred texts. Articles published in this book present the views and understandings of their authors and are not necessarily congruous with the formal and prevalent views, thus encouraging other scholars to further investigate the same subjects. In addition, the texts of the

articles are published as provided by the authors. Their writing styles and scholarly approaches are therefore different.

The references of the article on “Nietzsche and the Bahá’í Writings” which was published in Book Seventeen was mistakenly omitted in electronic transfer of the manuscript. It is republished here in its revised and complete text. Provisional translations of the Bahá’í Writings in English by the authors are for the documentation of the contents of the articles and should not be separately published and distributed as authorized translations. Articles are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the authors’ surnames.

‘Irfán publications are sponsored by the generous support of Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund and voluntary contributions of the friends of the ‘Irfan Colloquium. It is hoped that such supports as well as the collaboration of scholars would make it possible to continue the ‘Irfan project and services.

Iraj Ayman

April 2017

An Inquiry on the Role of Religion in Wealth and Poverty

Hooshmand Badee

Abstract

In theory, the spirit of all Faiths is upholding the well-being of all people, believers and non-believers, and therefore a coherence of material and spiritual development is prescribed in all Holy Scriptures. The presentation will identify possible areas where religion has contributed to the debate on wealth creation and poverty eradication. Finally, it will conclude that the effective partnership of the two disciplines of religion as a spiritual realm and economics as a social science, although different entities, fosters human well-being. Care must be taken that wealth creation and poverty eradication have many facets and cannot be dealt with solely from a religious perspective. Therefore, this presentation is not a purely theological exercise to judge the correctness or validity of any religious position, but rather a neutral study of social, cultural, economic, historical, and religious exploration.

Introduction

The concept of wealth is difficult to define or measure because it is mainly a stock of assets such as house, land or personal possessions and accumulated money; therefore, it is different from income. Income is a flow while wealth is a stock. If we define wealth as the abundance of valuable possessions and assets, then it is difficult to measure because they can be appreciated or depreciated. The question is how income and wealth affect well-being, standard of living, and the creation of a happy life. Currently, Gross Domestic Product (or GDP) measures standard of living and economic growth in a country. This measurement is based solely on the monetary value of goods and services and ignores for example negative externalities such as the production of those unnecessary and damaging products affecting the life of humans, animals, and the environment. A 'happy life' could not be measured in terms of monetary values alone but rather in terms of well-being; income being one of the features. With 'well-being' the all-encompassing levels of deprivation need to be addressed. For example, a good society should be measured in terms of how human rights is respected and practiced, or in terms of how women and girls are treated. Hence, those values applied in current socio-political-economic systems need to be revised. Religion can suggest values that can redirect attention away from selfish greed and the need to own and consume. Values such as honesty, trustworthiness, compassion, cooperation and fairness are moral resources and should become part of an economic system.

Wealth accumulation

According to economist Thomas Piketty, "The distribution of wealth is one of today's most widely discussed and controversial issues."¹ Piketty is concerned about the long-term evolution of wealth. He raises questions such as: do the dynamics of private capital accumulation inevitably lead to the

concentration of wealth in ever fewer hands? The problem of wealth accumulation and its concentration in the hands of a few is expanding and keeps growing locally, nationally, and globally. As the economy grows, concentration of private wealth gets worse. Exploring this view, Oxfam has been giving depressing updates on wealth concentration each year. For example, they have reported that in 2010, 388 richest people in the world owned more wealth than that owned by the bottom half of the world population. In 2014, 85 richest people were in the same position. In 2015 the number reduced to 80 people. This year (2016) Oxfam predicted that 62 richest people own more wealth than the total wealth of the bottom half of world population. Sadly, the private wealth concentration is getting worse and worse each year.

This kind of wealth accumulation and its concentration in the hands of few is dangerous because it causes imbalance in the market and economic activities including shortages and surpluses of products and hence wastage of valuable rare earth resources. Concentration of wealth also means concentration of social and political power, and concentration of privileges, and opportunities. This may cause destroying harmony and democracy, and pushes the world towards social explosions. The reverse is also true, if we do not have any wealth, we have no power, no privileges, and no opportunities. The bottom 50% of the world population who own only a small fraction of 1% of the global wealth, belong to this category. Concentration of wealth was observed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, He said if “...*some are accumulating exorbitant wealth and others are in dire want — under such a system it is impossible for man to be happy.*” [FWU 39]

Concentration of wealth is an ongoing non-stop process under the present economic system. A current economic assumption is that human happiness can be achieved merely by increasing the wealth of the individual members of society. The underlying assumption is that all human beings are motivated by self-interest, selfishness and greed and that the more any particular economic policy caters for these base motivations,

the more successful it will be. The self is primarily seen seeking to maximize his or her own utility, often through maximization of consumption opportunity. The root idea flowing from self-interest is consumer sovereignty and utility maximisation. The rationale is that consumers know their interests best and can act to advance them through exchange. For many, prosperity lies in increasing consumption and each consumer will pursue his or her opportunities until the marginal cost of a transaction exceeds the benefits of it. Each person maximizes utility or happiness subject to a number of constraints, including income. Thus, the economic theory considers mainly monetary aspects of life and ignores other factors, such as those values that are essential for creating interactions among people, and those necessary values for protecting the environment, and respecting the future generation.

Let us draw our attention to the point that the richest people are not necessarily immoral people, as popularly imagined; it is partly the systems that allow them to behave immoral. Since 1776 with the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith, that the modern economic system or the free market economy has been in operation, those in power and perhaps with good intentions have tried to bring a better life for the generality of the population, but the manipulation, mismanagement and abuse of systems has created a condition which led to widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Shoghi Effendi in 1927 perceived the need for a system that "...prevents among others the gradual control of wealth in the hands of a few and the resulting state of both extremes, wealth and poverty."² It can also be said that wealthy people have enormous political power and influence and do not allow decision-makers to prevent them from becoming even wealthier. The current free market system is out of control and does not convey the original message advocated by its founder, Adam Smith, in his second book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this book, Smith discusses the position of philosophers and those in charge of the society. He argues that

it would be contradictory and unjust for them just to think about their own self-interest. Instead they should cultivate a sense of public duty in order to be any good at helping to solve the world's most pressing problems. Disappointingly, this vital and critical idea of the founder of the free market system is forgotten. There is a need for a new way of thinking to change the economic structure of the whole society. The Universal House of Justice believe that "A fresh look at the problem is required..."³ And in a more recent statement it is stated "With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds."⁴ In reference to capitalism, in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, it is stated: "There is nothing in the teachings against some kind of capitalism; its present form, though, would require adjustments to be made."⁵

Concerning the issue of poverty, the current process of globalization, although defective in many ways, is one way for poverty reduction. According to the World Bank, the number of people who have come out of absolute poverty in last three decades has fallen from 1.2 billion to 700 million.⁶ The concern, however, is that the poverty reduction has not occurred evenly across the globe. Supporting this view, the Noble Memorial of Economic Science 2001, Joseph Stiglitz writes:

The current process of globalization is generating unbalanced outcomes, both between and within countries. Wealth is being created, but too many countries and people are not sharing in its benefits. They also have little or no voice in shaping the process. Seen through the eyes of the vast majority of women and men, globalization has not met their simple and legitimate aspirations for decent jobs and a better future for their children. Many of them live in the limbo of the informal economy without formal rights and in a swathe of poor countries that subsist precariously on

the margins of the global economy. Even in economically successful countries some workers and communities have been adversely affected by globalization. Meanwhile the revolution in global communications heightens awareness of these disparities... these global imbalances are morally unacceptable and politically unsustainable.⁷

Another worrying condition of current process of globalization is that increasing the wealth of the rich is much steeper than the decline of the poverty level, and this is exactly the concern in the Bahá'í writings, and hence advocating the role of government in elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "*The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished*" [PT 159]. He, elsewhere emphasizes the important role of government in balancing the economic power:

There must be special laws made, dealing with these extremes of riches and of want. The members of the Government should consider the laws of God when they are framing plans for the ruling of the people. The general rights of mankind must be guarded and preserved. [PT 159]

The role of religion

For a discussion of the role and function of religion and its connection with wealth and poverty we need to understand and be clear about the claims of the Founders of Faiths and the nature of the contents of Holy Scriptures and the ways they can be interpreted. Did for example, Muḥammad, Jesus, Moses, Bahá'u'lláh and other Prophets of God appear to solve our economic problems? Did anyone of these Prophets claim to be

experts in wealth creation and poverty eradication? Are the Holy Scriptures academic textbooks containing materials on the subject of wealth and poverty? The Bahá'í Writings maintain the view that these prophets are divine educators, and Holy Scriptures are guidance for better living and creating love, fellowship and unity amongst people. Bahá'u'lláh states: "*The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth*" [GWB 156-157]. However, religions also have expressed views on how the poor and the rich should be treated. There are principle guidelines, recommendations and commandments about what should be consumed, what should be produced, and the way resources should be distributed. These instructions are mainly with moral and spiritual foundation affecting human behaviours. These guidelines help experts in different fields to device programs, models and systems with a moral and ethical approach.

The main functions of religion in relation to wealth and poverty can be summarized as follows: *First*, religion can redirect human thought to spiritual concerns, focusing on spiritual aspect of wealth and poverty, and remind them of the duty to care for other human beings. It can be argued that alleviating poverty is about restoring the caring attitude. A number of spiritual principles supports this claim, for example, the Christian command "Love your neighbor as yourself,"⁸ the Islamic command of Muslim brotherhood which states "without doubt believers are brothers of one another,"⁹ the Jewish appreciation of Jewish community solidarity, and Bahá'u'lláh's exhortations to the Bahá'ís: "*Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship*" [GWB 95]. These statements are clearly reflecting upon relationship and interdependence by way of love, a condition necessary to appropriate wealth creation and poverty alleviation. The true spirit of all the Faiths can influence this aspect of human affairs. *Second*, religion can provide the ethical function. Altruism is a human quality, which emphasises the human

responsibility towards others. Religion reminds people of this condition of human nature, to seek selflessly to benefit others. *Third*, religion teaches society proper values and principles to be applied in a given socio-political-economic system. Wealth, fame and power are now considered synonymous in many societies. Those with wealth have the power to control the lives of the poor. The current capitalistic value system maintains differences between the poor and the rich. Greed is an unacceptable quality, but it is one of the features of capitalistic system. It would be more appropriate if a socio-political-economic system were based on fair values, enabling survival of all the people rather than survival of the wealthy. Currently none of the existing systems satisfy this condition. Shoghi Effendi states: "Every system, short of the unification of the human race, has been tried, repeatedly tried, and been found wanting...crisis has succeeded crisis" [WOB 190]. There is a need for an economic system that is fair, flexible, and universal, and based on human values. Religion is the source of human values, and provides hope for the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants. Therefore, according to the Bahá'í International Community, it is "...inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society, a society which nourishes a spectacular diversity of cultures and nations, can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support."¹⁰

A survey of religion on wealth and poverty

Religiosity is a growing phenomenon, especially among the poorer societies. Claims are made by a number of researchers that poverty is a cause of religiosity, or the poor people are more spiritual. Jacob Olupona, an expert in African spirituality confirms that in Africa the most impoverished people tend to be deeply spiritual.¹¹ Also, research carried out by two political scientists, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, indicate how religion is growing, especially amongst poor and oppressed communities. A feeling of insecurity, lack of food and fight for

survival for example, create the seedbed for religious dependency. A need for dependence amongst the oppressed and the poor, therefore, strengthens religious belief. These experts found close correlation between poverty and religiosity in eighty societies, covering most of the world's major Faiths. Based on their research, it is argued that religious dependency persists most strongly among vulnerable populations, especially those in the poorer nations and in failed states, facing personal survival-threatening risks. The researcher's claim is that exposure to physical, societal and personal risks drive religiosity. Conversely, a systematic erosion of traditional religious practices, values and beliefs appear to have occurred among the more prosperous strata in the rich nations. At the same time, a growing proportion of the population – in both rich and poor nations – spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. It is argued that in developed countries, the established churches are losing their ability to tell people how to live their lives, but spiritual concerns, broadly defined, may be becoming increasingly important.¹²

Poverty has many faces. It can be material, social, cultural, or spiritual. The causes of poverty can be man-made or through natural disasters such as: shortage of physical and human resources; political instability; internal conflict; national debt crisis; human rights issues including discrimination and social inequality; poor health-care system; unemployment; weak and unrecognized currency in the international market; social exclusion; natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes. Also, the poor have little opportunity for adequate education and gaining skills or having access to necessary resources for wealth creation.

Furthermore, the presence of certain values in the current economic and market condition upholds poverty. For instance, through effective advertisement, the need is created to consume; also, excessive availability of credit makes it easier to buy and fall into debt; and social status is constructed in terms of what one possesses. Therefore, the more one possess, the

higher their social standing. The consumption driven economy urges cheap production in order to participate in a competitive market. The result is the exploitation of labour and resources. These values stimulate consumption and they create the illusion that poverty can only be alleviated by increased consumption and a proper life is a life of consuming more goods. The more one has, the richer she/he appears: while, in fact, in trying to possess more one become poorer.

A comparative study of religion, wealth and poverty

In modern time, due to creativity, innovation, improved transportation, and increased human and technological capabilities, the wealth of nations has increased significantly. The question is whether the balancing forces of growth, competition and technological progress would lead to reduced inequality and create greater harmony among the classes? The challenge, therefore, is not increasing the wealth but how it is created rightfully and distributed fairly. The aspect of wealth redistribution and its accumulation in the hands of a few have been the concern of Holy Scriptures and hence laws are set for its just distribution. The phrase “poverty” can be interpreted as either spiritual or material poverty. However, the spirit of the teachings of all Faiths encourages earning through integrity and hard works to support own self, one’s own family, helping others, and contributing for social progress. In practice there is variation about the two concepts of wealth and poverty among the different Faiths and within a particular Faith. Here a brief description of wealth and poverty is provided from perspective of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í Faith. It is worth noting that given centuries of divergent interpretations of Scriptures and a huge range of practice within each, attempting to summarize Faith’s perspective on wealth and poverty in few pages would not be justified, but some salient lines of thought in each could be identified.

Judaism

Judaism sees no merit in poverty. It is stated, “We are on earth to experience and enjoy this life within the constraints of the law.”¹³ These rules include a very strong responsibility to support those in need. According to the Jewish view “poverty is an unmitigated evil.”¹⁴ Jews see no virtue in poverty, poverty is pointless suffering, and hence it is not admired. The Jewish attitude towards wealth is quite positive. In fact, wealth, peace, and/or long life are rewards from God for obeying God’s laws.¹⁵ God will bless those that use their wealth to help the poor.¹⁶ Jewish view on wealth is very much related to charity. Hence, acquiring wealth is praiseworthy, because it allows them to contribute generously to charity and to help the poor regardless of their background. It is clear that Judaism sees nothing wrong with wealth as long as it is obtained honestly and used to help the poor. In other words, wealthy people should not live in luxury, and wasting their wealth on unnecessary things. Asceticism and becoming financially a burden on others, on the other hand, was opposed by many of the Jewish scholars and philosophers. According to Jewish scholar Joseph Isaac Lifshitz, Jewish law calls upon Jews to do everything in their power to avoid becoming a burden on others. They are to be responsible for their own welfare and not to rely on the community to provide for them.¹⁷

Christianity

In Christianity, poverty and a humble life help bring individuals closer to God. Wealth is not inherently evil, but greed causes people to act in their own self-interest and distracts believers from helping others. In the New Testament, it is stated, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” [Luke 6:20]. The term ‘poor’ may be interpreted as detachment from material things; one should have a humble life and not be possessed by material wealth. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

When Christ came upon the earth, those who believed in Him and followed Him were the poor and lowly, showing that the poor were near to God. When a rich man believes and follows the Manifestation of God, it is a proof that his wealth is not an obstacle and does not prevent him from attaining the pathway of salvation. [PUP 216]

Christ says to His Disciples, “Blessed are the poor.” For those who struggle in difficult times, such as material poverty, this would bring them comfort and hope. Struggles during difficult times give people an opportunity to try for improvement while placing trust in Christ and let Him be the source of hope, strength and security. In the *Hidden Words*, Bahá’u’lláh states:

O Son of My Handmaid! Be not troubled in poverty nor confident in riches, for poverty is followed by riches, and riches are followed by poverty. Yet to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift, belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God, and thus thou shalt know the meaning of the utterance, ‘In truth ye are the poor’... [HW Persian #51]

Also, Jesus rejects the possibility of dual service. He said: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth” [Matthew 6:24]. For an understanding of this verse, we look at the Saint Paul’s interpretation. According to Saint Paul, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” [Timothy 6:10]. Consequently, wealth is looked at negatively if a person places it above spirituality. Therefore, it is not about whether or not one saves up money or accumulates wealth. It is about one’s motives for doing so. Looking at this from a different perspective, it would be possible to consider ‘poverty’ as having a humble and simple life, and being content and satisfied, which are in agreement with the spirit of Christian Faith. And since the main message

of Christ is love and fellowship, then association with others will be more effective if a person has enough material possession to be able to give a part of it generously to those in need, rather than asking for help or to beg.

The following statement from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests that references in the Bible to poverty and wealth may also have a literal meaning:

And the seventh question: Bahá’u’lláh hath been made manifest to all mankind and He hath invited all to the table of God, the banquet of Divine bounty. Today, however, most of those who sit at that table are the poor, and this is why Christ hath said blessed are the poor, for riches do prevent the rich from entering the Kingdom; and again, He saith, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.’ [Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25] If, however, the wealth of this world, and worldly glory and repute, do not block his entry therein, that rich man will be favoured at the Holy Threshold and accepted by the Lord of the Kingdom. [SWAB 195]

The interpretation of wealth, particularly from Protestant¹⁸ point of view is that the pursuit of wealth is not only acceptable but it is an outcome of faith and a religious duty. This perspective is generally attributed to Calvinist, associated to John Calvin¹⁹. Calvinism as a school of thought set the stage for the later development of capitalism in northern Europe. In this view, elements of Calvinism represented a revolt against the medieval condemnation of profit earning and wealth accumulation in general. The view considers hard work and good and healthy lifestyles as spiritual acts. The supporters are strong advocates of wealth creation, and to avoid wealth becoming an obstacle to faith. Among those who view wealth as an outcome of faith are the supporters of prosperity theology, viewing that God promises wealth and abundance to those who will believe in him and follow his laws.

Max Weber²⁰ in 1904-1905 submitted a thesis and argued that Reformed Calvinist and Protestantism have led to modern capitalism. The English translation of his work, which was in German, was published in book form in 1930 as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber argued that capitalism in northern Europe evolved because the Protestant, particularly Calvinist ethic influenced large numbers of people to engage in work in the secular world, developing their own enterprises and engaging in trade and the accumulation of wealth for investment. Weber's work focused scholars on the question of the uniqueness of Western civilization and the nature of its economic and social development. Scholars have sought to explain the fact that economic growth has been much more rapid in Northern and Western Europe and its overseas offshoots than in other parts of the world including those Catholic and Orthodox churches that have been dominant over Protestantism.

Islam

In Islam, the Prophet's Hadíths indicate that poverty is a danger and threat for both individuals and societies. It is an unwanted situation from which every Muslim should protect himself. He Himself prayed "O My Allah, I refuge to you from the evils of poverty"²¹, and He advised the following prayer for His friends: "Refuge to Allah from the evils of poverty, famine, degradation, oppressing and oppressed."²² Indeed a devoted Muslim is one who has adequate wealth, but never puts it into his/her heart. Hence, wealth is good as long as it does not become a source of pride, arrogance and oppression or cause people to be enslaved to it. Furthermore, Islam considers that struggling to make a living by producing something through commerce is a meritorious act. In order to sustain a good life in this world, working and having enough property is imperative for everyone in Islam. Moreover, working to obtain property and maintain a good life is accepted as a valuable effort and worship. It is stated in the Qur'an that while the night is

created for rest, the day is created for the maintenance of life [Qur'an 28:73].

The holy Qur'an provides two levels of poverty: (1) those living at or below the poverty level defined as the poor (*al-fuqara*). These are the persons who lack material means, possessions or income to support them.²³ And (2) those living very much below it, defined as the destitute (*al-masakin*). The destitute (*miskin*) is in misery, dependent on others, either unable to work or not earning enough to maintain himself and his family. As compared to the poor (*fakir*), he is in a worse economic condition, well below the poverty level. Hence, there is a distinction between the poor, the destitute, and a person who uses begging as a profession.

The guidance from the verses of the Qur'an refers to charity as an important approach to reduce poverty. Charity-based Islamic models are financially and socially sustainable because they are based on the concepts of brotherhood, local philanthropy, and volunteer services. These can broadly target the economic and social needs of the poor.

Another important measure for poverty eradication in Islam is Zakah. It is a mandatory duty for the wealthy to perform. Zakah is an important means for poverty alleviation if work is not available or its return is not sufficient to meet the individual's basic needs in life. Every wealthy Muslim must pay Zakah to complete his worship to God.²⁴ Being wealthy means having "Nisab" which is a given level of monetary or in-kind wealth exceeding one's needs and that of his family. Zakah is a religious duty calculated as a fixed percentage on each form of wealth. It is calculated as 2.5% of most physical and financial assets, 5% of agricultural products from artificially irrigated land and 10% for naturally irrigated land; for cattle not used for land work it is levied in-kind after a minimum number for each kind. Zakah is to be paid at the end of each lunar year; only Zakah of the agricultural products is to be paid, mostly in-kind, at the harvesting time.²⁵

There is, however, the need for clarification when discussing wealth creation and wealth redistribution from Judaism, Christianity and Islamic perspective. They do indeed have a great deal to say about the poor, about work, and about social justice. But their teachings are revealed for another age and a relatively primitive economy. It should be noted that economic ideas are always and closely a product of their own time and place. The exploration of the Bahá'í teachings on economics has occupied an important place in the Bahá'í Writings because Bahá'u'lláh has appeared at a time of global economic integration and interdependency of nations. The economic teachings have a vital effect on the Bahá'í community and on the wider society.

The Bahá'í view on wealth and poverty

In the Bahá'í writings the acquisition of wealth is not condemned, but 'true wealth' has been interpreted differently. The notion of true wealth consists of faith and building moral character and wisdom. The Writings consider the dual nature of human beings. This unique perspective connects material and spiritual well-being. The view is that human beings are spiritual in nature and thus, material well-being alone cannot guarantee human happiness. Bahá'ís are directed that they would be happier if the spiritual aspects of their lives are fulfilled and developed alongside the material; it is stated that "*...only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured*" [PUP 110]. Abdu'l-Bahá refers to concepts of spirituality and wealth as two different things. Consequently, there is no need for a complete rejection of one for total acceptance of the other. Confirming this 'Abdu'l-Bahá says "*Material progress and spiritual progress are two very different things, and that only if material progress goes hand in hand with spirituality can any real progress come about*" [PT 107].

Wealth is regarded positively in the Bahá'í Writings. For example, Bahá'u'lláh approves the need for wealth after the

stage of maturity. Moreover, wealth is appreciated if it is acquired legitimately through honest work, and is spent sensibly. In the following statement, Bahá'u'lláh describes the attainment of wealth by one's own efforts and hard work as desirable after reaching the stage of maturity:

...man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty. Having attained the stage of fulfilment and reached his maturity, man standeth in need of wealth, and such wealth as he acquireth through crafts or professions is commendable and praiseworthy in the estimation of men of wisdom, and especially in the eyes of servants who dedicate themselves to the education of the world and to the edification of its peoples. [TB 34]

The stage of fulfilment and reaching maturity in the light of this discussion can be described as attaining a high level of human consciousness where the acquisition of wealth becomes worthy, if achieved through appropriate means and expended for an appropriate ends. Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes how wealth should be acquired and spent. He said, "*Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes*" [SDC 4]. According to this passage, the first condition for acquiring wealth is that it must be earned by one's own efforts. This emphasises the need to work and be a productive member of the society. The second condition is that the income earned be spent on charitable and philanthropic activities, thereby directing the Bahá'í community towards a culture of philanthropic, humanitarian and benevolent acts. The understanding is that one should not be possessed by the love of wealth but being detached. In the following statement attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the meaning and implication of material detachment:

Detachment does not consist in setting fire to one's house, or becoming bankrupt or throwing one's fortune out of the window, or even giving away all of one's possessions. Detachment consists in refraining from letting our possessions possess us. A prosperous merchant who is not absorbed in his business knows severance. A banker whose occupation does not prevent him from serving humanity is severed. A poor man can be attached to a small thing. [ADP 135]

For further analysis of wealth creation and redistribution there is a need to make a distinction between ‘means’ and ‘ends’, otherwise what is a mere instrument could become the main goal of an individual in life. Reminding His followers of the importance of reliance in God while engaging in an occupation, Bahá’u’lláh said: “*It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation ... Hold ye fast unto the cord of means and place your trust in God, the Provider of all means*” [KA para#30]. The affirmation is that the money earned is a ‘means’, not an ‘end’ and that God is ‘the provider of all means.’ These ‘means’ are those that are befitting human dignity. The indication is that our economic models cannot reduce all values to money or what is known as ‘commoditization’²⁶ in a competitive market.

Expounding on the same subject, the Universal House of Justice, addressing the Bahá’í community, stresses that the acquisition of wealth as a ‘means’ for achieving higher ‘ends’ such as meeting one’s basic needs, promoting the welfare of society, and contributing to the establishment of a world civilisation is praiseworthy.²⁷ Exploring the concept of wealth and the justification for acquiring it, the Universal House of Justice states: “However constructive and noble the goal, however significant to one’s life or to the welfare of one’s family [wealth] must not be attained through improper means.”²⁸ Examples of “improper means” might include using child labor, paying low wages for reducing cost to increase

profit, unfair trade through aggressive competition, or any activities that lead to the destruction of the environment. Furthermore, policies, which internalise 'negative externalities', should be carefully evaluated so as not to foster attitudes of self-satisfaction and selfishness. Negative externalities are where the actions of an individual or a firm has an impact on others for which they do not pay, such as the cost of damaging roads and polluting the air by driving a car. Internalising negative externality means that in this example car drivers are responsible to pay the cost of road maintenance and pollution.²⁹ In a similar fashion it should be noted how economic theory with its self-interest utilitarianism has reduced everything to commodities. To avoid these difficulties, there is much guidance as to how to carefully weigh the difference between gaining wealth in fields such as agriculture, commerce, the arts and industry, and in obtaining it without effort or through improper means.

Economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has commented on the two elements of 'means' and 'ends'. He is establishing an association between the two in relation to commodities and a level of 'functioning' in life. The commodities over which a person had command were, after all, only a means to an end, and that end was a level of functioning in life, being able to live the kind of life that one values. This 'functioning' was subject to objective measurement as well, such as: life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy, morbidity, political participation and so on.³⁰ Sen was concerned that the average longevity of a resident of a poor neighborhood in New York is less than that of a resident of Dhaka in Bangladesh, despite the fact that not only incomes, but real incomes, are many times higher in some parts of New York than in Dhaka.³¹ Sen's view helps to better understand the legitimacy of how wealth is obtained and how it is spent in relation to 'means' and 'ends'.

Reflecting on the following verse from the Bible "*You cannot serve both God and wealth*" [Matthew 6:24] one can view it in the light of the two concepts of 'ends' and 'means'. That is,

God is the 'ends' and money or wealth is the 'means'. As the human being is spiritual in nature, material means can be used to serve spiritual ends.

On the issue of poverty, the question can indeed be asked whether the concepts of religion and poverty belong together? One may argue that poverty is a material condition related to food, housing, clothing, and other necessities for living; and religion is a spiritual entity related to transcendental. Therefore, these two do not belong to each other. However, studying religious scriptures, we can maintain that religion has positive effects on poverty reduction. For example, religion supports the production of those goods and services that are befitting human dignity, hence avoiding the production of commodities that are destructive and damaging to human life and to the environment. Religion encourages moderation, and inspires believers to work and be productive members of the society. Religion focuses on the importance of education. Education, also leading to the emancipation and empowerment of women, inspiring them to participate at all levels of society resulting in an increase in the wealth of a nation. The positive opportunities and accomplishments achieved through spiritual education will create the necessary conditions for activities resulting in acquiring wealth and a smoother process of attaining well-being.

The role of religion when it comes to poverty can never be reduced to merely sympathy and well-wishing, nor empty words of comfort by emphasising a better future still to come. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is talking about the real need of the poor which are food, cloths, housing, good health, and education. People with different religious affiliations need to play an active role in attempting to alleviate poverty. Religion, therefore, creates an awareness of the problem of poverty by redirecting the attention to a higher spiritual existence, devoid of material needs, but does not change the existential effects of poverty.

Monetary instruments such as money and wealth are ‘means’ and in some sense determine the way we can relate to others, particularly to those in need. In this dispensation, the rich are given the responsibility to take care of the poor. This is confirmed in numerous Writings of the Founder of this Faith:

- *“Blessed is ... the rich one who careth for the poor...”* [TB 70]
- *“O children of Dust! Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor...”* [HW Persian #49]
- *“O ye rich ones on earth! The poor in your midst are My trust, guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.”* [HW Persian #54]
- *“They who are possessed of riches, however, must have the utmost regard for the poor...”* [GWB 202]
- *“O ye rich ones of the earth! Flee not from the face of the poor that lieth in the dust...”* [GWB 314]
- *“The beginning of magnanimity is when man expendeth his wealth on himself, on his family and on the poor among his brethren in his Faith.”* [TB 156]

It requires a great deal of material sacrifice and spiritual enrichment by the rich to guard the poor. However, the wealthy Bahá’ís taking responsibility for the poor does not exclude the poor from taking responsibility for their own lives. Bahá’u’lláh states: *“...the poor may exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood. This is a duty which, in this most great Revelation, hath been prescribed unto every one, and is accounted in the sight of God as a goodly deed”* [GWB 202]. Shoghi Effendi states that: “Every individual, no matter how handicapped and limited he may be, is under the obligation of engaging in some work or profession...” [DG 47]. The term handicapped may raise a question as to how would one expect a handicapped person to work and whether this refers to someone with physical or mental disability, while knowing that begging is forbidden. It may be said that the effectiveness of a disabled

individual's work depends on the availability of social and medical services along with technological advancement to support such people to be engaged in work that they can perform. In developed countries, more attention is paid to ensure that people with physical and mental disabilities receive appropriate support to engage in some form of profession, which improves their sense of well-being, as well as allows them to be more productive members of the society. Good planning by governments and on the part of institutions, and of course individual self-initiative are partly responsible for such provisions.

As the Bahá'í community evolves and principles such as work as worship, compulsory education, participation of women in social and economic activities are applied, absolute poverty shall disappear and there will not be any need for individuals to remain in absolute poverty. However, it is not reasonable to think that the individuals' generosity is the only way of dealing with the challenges of poverty. The role of the government and good governance through legislation and other methods such as social welfare programs is crucial in its eradication. Therefore, when expressing concern about poverty, the Bahá'í Writings suggest a holistic approach, keeping all needs of humans in mind by creating a balance in human life.

Conclusion

This paper maintained the view that religion is able to have positive effects on wealth creation and poverty alleviation. The view presented that Holy Scriptures emphasise the production of those goods and services that are befitting human dignity. Religion has traditionally defined human nature, and our relationship with each other and with respect to the environment. Religion is "*the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human advancement*" [PUP 361]. All Faiths encourage the practice of moderation, which may result in avoidance of shortages and surpluses of commodities in the market and hence the efficient use of valuable resources.

Religion also encourages sharing and caring and hence influences improved wealth redistribution. Many of the important decisions about family, work and savings have been rooted in religious beliefs. Religion focuses on the importance of education and training for the development of human resource that constitutes the ultimate basis for wealth of nations. The positive opportunities and accomplishments achieved through education will create the necessary conditions for well-being. Work done in a spirit of service is considered as worship, and this spiritual principle inspires believers to be productive members of the society. Religion reveals to us principles that are neither invention of the human mind nor social conventions, rather, insights into reality. Science helps us apply these principles to the social reality in which we are immersed. The proposition is that there is economic poverty but there is also spiritual and moral impoverishment. It is this latter form of poverty that has a direct impact on economic poverty because it prohibits a person from living and functioning to his or her full potential. The perception, therefore, is that the two disciplines of religion as a spiritual realm and a source for moral regeneration, and economics as a social science, although different entities, the effective partnership of the two fosters human well-being through right channels of wealth creation, and wealth redistribution. Hence, there is no need for the complete rejection of one, and the total acceptance of the other, it is with the partnership of material advancement and spirituality that any real progress come about.

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- See Noris, P. and Inglehart, R. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (2011).
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- ¹ Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014, p. 1.
- ² Shoghi Effendi. Letter dated 28 October 1927. In Helen Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, New Delhi, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983, p. 548, no. 1860.
- ³ Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, p. 10, Haifa, Bahá'í World Centre Publication, 1985.
- ⁴ Ibid., letter dated 1 March 2017.
- ⁵ Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 19 November 1945. *Lights of Guidance*, p. 550, no. 1869.
- ⁶ The World Bank projects that global poverty will have fallen from 902 million people or 12.8 per cent of the global population in 2012 to 702 million people, or 9.6 per cent of the global population, this year. Source: www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/10/04/world-bank-forecasts-global-poverty-to-fall-below-10-for-first-time-major-hurdles-remain-in-goal-to-end-poverty-by-2030
- ⁷ Stiglitz, Joseph. *Making Globalisation Work*, London: Penguin Books, 2006 p. 269.
- ⁸ Luke 19:18; Matthew 22:39.
- ⁹ Qur'an, Surat al-Hujurat, "إِخْوَةُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِنَّمَا" 49:10.

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- ¹⁰ Bahá'í International Community. 'Statement on Sustainable Development,' World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, August 26, 2002.
- ¹¹ Olupona, Jacob. (2009:xvi). *Spirituality in Africa*, HARVARD gazette, (news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/)
- ¹² See Noris, P. and Inglehart, R. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, 2011.
- ¹³ See: 613 mitzvot (commandments).
- ¹⁴ Sacks, Jonathan. *Wealth and Poverty: A Jewish Analysis*, The Social Affairs Unit 1985. socialaffairsunit.org.uk/digipub/index2.php?option=content&do_pdf=1&id=16
- ¹⁵ See: Leviticus 26: 3-13; Deuteronomy 11: 13-16; Deuteronomy 25:15; Proverbs 22:4.
- ¹⁶ See: Deuteronomy 15:10; Isaiah 1:17-19; Proverbs 19:17.
- ¹⁷ See: Lifshitz, Joseph Isaac (2008). *Markets, morals and religion*, Transaction Publishers. p. 123.
- ¹⁸ Protestantism, movement that began in northern Europe in the early 16th century as a reaction to medieval Roman Catholic doctrines and practices. Along with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism became one of three major forces in Christianity. After a series of European religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries, and especially in the 19th century, it spread throughout the world. Wherever Protestantism gained a foothold, it influenced the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the area. The name was attached not only to the disciples of Martin Luther (c. 1483-1546) but also to the Swiss disciples of Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) and later of John Valvin (1509-64). The Swiss reformers and their followers in Holland, England, and Scotland, especially after the 17th century, preferred the name Reformed. See www.britannica.com/topic/Protestantism
- ¹⁹ John Calvin, French Jean Calvin, or Calvin (born July 10, 1509, Noyon, Picardy, France – died May 27, 1564, Geneva, Switzerland) theologian and ecclesiastical statesman. He was the leading French Protestant Reformer. His interpretation of Christianity, advanced above all in his *Institution Christiane* religionist (1536 but elaborated in later editions;), and the institutional and social patterns he worked out for Geneva deeply influenced Protestantism elsewhere in Europe and in North America. The Calvinist form of Protestantism is widely thought to have had a major impact on the formation of the modern world. See: www.britannica.com/biography/John-Calvin
- ²⁰ Max Weber, (born April 21, 1864, Erfurt, Prussia, [now Germany] – died June 14, 1920, Munich, Germany) German sociologist and political economist best known for his thesis of the "Protestant ethic," relating

Protestantism to Capitalism, and for his ideas on bureaucracy. Weber's profound influence on sociological theory stems from his demand for objectivity in scholarship and from his analysis of the motives behind human action. See: www.britannica.com/biography/Max-Weber-German-sociologist

²¹ See: Ibn Hanbal, 1953.

²² Ibid.

²³ See: Ul-Haq, 1996.

²⁴ Qur'an 107: 1-7; 21:73; 19:31; 19:55.

²⁵ See: Al Qaradawi, 1981.

²⁶ John Sloman. *Economics*, 6th ed., London: Pearson Education, 2006, p. 157.

²⁷ Universal House of Justice. Letter dated 2 April 2010, Haifa, 2010.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ For 'Negative externalities,' See: Begg, Fischer, and Dornbusch, *Economics*, pp. 304-305.

³⁰ Amartya Sen. *Equality of What*, S. McMurrin (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, P. 37.

³¹ Ibid.

Biblical References in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*

JoAnn Borovicka

Abstract

Throughout His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes liberal reference to biblical stories, verses, and images. A problem that may arise for many contemporary readers is that of biblical illiteracy; research shows that knowledge of the Bible is at an all-time low at this time. Lack of familiarity with the contexts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s biblical references could not only undermine one’s full understanding of His instruction, but may also render one incapable of following ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example of integrating biblical references into one’s teaching. The purpose of this paper is to explore the contexts of four biblical references found in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* in order to demonstrate the value that biblical literacy brings to the study and implementation of these Tablets.

Introduction

In His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises the unifying and educative effects of previous Dispensations and

emphasizes that the essential task at this time is “*the promotion of divine teachings which are the foundations of the holy religions*” in order that “*affinity between the hearts of the world of humanity*” may be established [TDP 14.9]. He refers to the spiritual foundations that all religions share as the “*Collective Center of the sacred religions*” [TDP 1411]. In addition to stating this mandate, the Tablets themselves provide examples of how to operate in this Collective Center as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá integrates stories, verses, and images from the Holy Bible in His instruction – every Tablet has at least one biblical image or reference.¹ For example, in the following passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sets out a call to action in the language of the Bible:

Every one of the important souls must arise, blowing over all parts of America the breath of life, conferring upon the people a new spirit, baptizing them with the fire of the love of God, the water of life, and the breaths of the Holy Spirit so that the second birth may become realized. For it is written in the Gospel: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit [John 3:6].” [TDP 14.6]

In another Tablet He uses biblical terms in His description of the desired qualities of Bahá’í teachers:

As regards the teachers, they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment. According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth – that is, whereas in the first instance they were born from the womb of the mother, this time they must be born from the womb of the world of nature.... They must be baptized with the water of life, the fire of the love of God and the breaths of the Holy Spirit; be satisfied with little food, but take a large portion from the heavenly table.... They must make the blind seeing, the deaf

*hearing, the extinguished one enkindled and set aglow,
and the dead quickened.* [TDP 13.7]

Most of the terms in the two passages above represent biblical images: heaven as the source of divine teachings [John 3:31]; the Holy Spirit as a blowing breath or wind² [John 3:8]; realization of the life of the spirit as a second birth [John 3:3-5]; baptism by water and fire [John 3:22-23; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16]; changing the old garment for the new [Luke 5:36]; helping the blind see, the deaf hear, and the dead live [Matthew 11:5]. Abdu'l-Bahá, the Perfect Exemplar, embraces biblical stories and terminologies and focuses on their spiritual meaning to the degree that the biblical terms themselves become vehicles for His instruction — there is no division between the nomenclature of the Bible and Bahá'í guidance. There are many such examples throughout the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*; in fact, every Tablet contains at least one biblical reference.³ And it is precisely at this point that we are confronted with the modern problem of biblical illiteracy.

All recent polls and research indicate that biblical literacy in America is at an all-time low.⁴ This is a drastic change from the early 20th century — the time of the writing of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* — when basic literacy and biblical literacy were “intimately intertwined” in North American public education systems that made liberal use of biblical stories and verses in primers as well as in instructional material at every grade level.⁵ Due to changes in perception of the role that religious literature plays in the public arena, America's public schools as well as its civic spaces are now largely devoid of direct biblical content — even though the Bible is widely recognized as the most influential book in the history of Western Civilization.⁶ Today's high-school English teachers note that even the simplest biblical allusions in English literature “must be explained to students clueless about the biblical story line and even the most prominent characters in Scripture.”⁷ Pollster George Gallup has called the United States “a nation of biblical illiterates.”⁸

Theologian Richard Rohr bemoans the situation as “collective ignorance.”⁹ Being a cross-section of the greater community, it is likely that Bahá’ís may be lacking in biblical knowledge as well. This author is not aware of statistical studies in this regard; however, her experience over years of facilitating Bahá’í Bible Study workshops attest to the notion that the average Bahá’í today is no more educated about the Bible than the average American.

The problem is one of connecting fully with the Bahá’í Writings. When a writer refers to a literary work or the utterance of a historical person, be it religious or secular, he or she demonstrates appreciation of that quotation, knowledge of its origin, and awareness of its context. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quotes a Bible verse or uses biblical terminology, can we not assume His knowledge of the contexts of those words? Context includes things such as surrounding verses, background information, whole stories, and entire chapters. Ignorance of the same on the part of the reader is to miss out on meaning. For example: to quote Martin Luther King’s statement “I have a dream” is to evoke the history of the entire Civil Rights movement in the United States. The simple statement, “A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet,” evokes all of the love and tragedy of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. To quote these passages is to demonstrate knowledge of their larger settings. If one were to unfamiliar with them as a reader, one would be sadly missing out.

It is extremely likely that Bahá’í readers in the early 20th Century were familiar with the contexts of the biblical references found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablets because the verses and stories of the Bible were a dominant presence in public discourse, family reading, and public school education at that time. Indeed, it is very likely that the American Bahá’ís of 1916 and 1917 learned to read through Bible verses and stories. The point that I hope to make in this paper is that readers today who seek to glean as much as possible from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instructions and to follow the example He puts forth in His

Tablets would very likely benefit from study of the biblical stories and verses referenced therein. With this in mind, this paper will explore the biblical contexts of four of the Bible references found in *Tablets of the Divine Plan* and reflect on the value that this knowledge brings to the study of these Tablets.

“Sown on Good Soil” [Luke 8:15]

In His 20 March 1916 Tablet to the Central States, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses a Bible reference as He compares teaching the Cause of God to scattering seeds:

The sons and daughters of the kingdom are like unto the real farmers. Through whichever state or country they pass they display self-sacrifice and sow divine seeds. From that seed harvests are produced. On this subject it is revealed in the glorious Gospel: When the pure seeds are scattered in the good ground heavenly blessing and benediction is obtained. [TDP 3.3]

Then He states: “*I hope that you may become assisted and confirmed, and never lose courage in the promotion of the divine teachings*” [TDP 3.3]. But what might cause one to “lose courage in the promotion of divine teachings,” especially when the harvest of sowing divine seeds brings “*blessing and benediction*”? [TDP 3.3] Some answers to that question can be found in the Gospel story that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to; that being the Parable of the Sower, a teaching story attributed to Christ that is found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke [Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15].

The Parable of the Sower describes four different outcomes of scattering seeds — the seeds fall variously on a path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil — and then the spiritual meanings of these different outcomes are explained in Scripture following the parable: (1) The seeds fallen on the path are eaten by birds, meaning: “*The seed is the Word of God.*

When anyone hears the Word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path” [Luke 8:11-12]. (2) Seeds that fall on rocky ground sprout quickly – but then wither and die, meaning: “*The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the Word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away*” [Luke 8:13]. (3) Seeds that fall on thorns sprout but are eventually choked out: “*As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature*” [Luke 8:14]. (4) Finally, seeds that fall on good ground bring a plentiful harvest, meaning: “*But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance*” [Luke 8:15].

When read in its entirety, the Parable of the Sower referred to by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not just list the possible outcomes of teaching endeavors, but also offers insights into spiritual barriers that restrict progress, such as lack of understanding, lack of spiritual roots, and being overwhelmed by the cares and riches of the world. These are challenges that can, with forethought, insight, wisdom, and accompaniment, be overcome in the seeker as well as the teacher.

“Shake Off the Dust From Your Feet” [Matthew 10:14]

In His 19 April 1916 Tablet to the United States and Canada, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes three conditions necessary to attain the spiritual station of the “*Hosts of God*”¹⁰ [TDP no. 8.3]. The first condition is absolute “*firmness in the Covenant of God*” [TDP no. 8.8], the second condition is “*fellowship and love amongst the believers*” [TDP no. 8.9], and the third is “*utmost severance*” [TDP no. 8.11]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s description of the third condition includes a Gospel reference:

Teachers must continually travel to all parts of the continent, nay, rather, to all parts of the world, but they must travel like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who journeyed throughout the cities of America. He was sanctified and free from every attachment and in the utmost severance. Just as His Holiness Christ says: Shake off the very dust from your feet. [TDP 8.11]

This Gospel reference is comparable to the statement in Matthew 10:14 attributed to Christ: *“If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town”* [Matthew 10:14]. This is just one verse from an entire chapter that is often entitled by biblical scholars “the Mission of the Twelve” in which Christ gives His Apostles instructions and tells them what to expect in the course of their ministries. An examination of this entire chapter reveals a fuller picture of what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was referencing. As stated in the Gospel of Matthew in words attributed to Christ:

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. [Matthew 10:16-18, 21-23]

When considering the context of the Gospel verse referenced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we are reminded that detachment from the way one is received when teaching the Faith is more than not getting one's feelings hurt when one is not welcome; it also involves willingly encountering all manner of situations and intense troubles that require great courage such as hostility,

floggings, governmental accusations, betrayals of those closest to you, death, and hatred by the generality of the people.

“Blessed Are the Poor” [Luke 6:20]

In the 8 April 1916 Tablet to the United States and Canada, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directs the friends to teach “*the reality of the Bible, the Gospel and the new divine teachings*” throughout Mexico and Central America, the islands of the West Indies, and South America, and He says to “*attach great importance to the indigenous population of America*” [TDP 6.8]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá summarizes His call to action with a Gospel verse concerning the poor, stating:

In short, O ye believers of God! Exalt your effort and magnify your aims. His Holiness Christ says: Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven.

[TDP no. 6:12]

The Gospel quote cited is just one verse from the “Beatitudes”¹¹ in Luke 6 — a set of four verses attributed to Christ that occur within a larger teaching often referred to as the “Sermon on the Plain.”¹² The setting of the Sermon on the Plain is presented at the beginning of Luke 6 where it is established that those in power at the time of Christ are opposed to His teachings and plotting against Him. Meanwhile in the countryside, Christ addresses His twelve Apostles, other disciples, and “*a great multitude of people*” from all over who “*had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases*” [Luke 6:17-18]. In the Beatitudes Christ describes something of the nature of His new community and His expectations for His followers. The quote that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to regarding the poor is in the first verse of these Beatitudes:

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be

filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.” [Luke 6:20-23, NRSV]

There are many understandings of this Scripture, including that it establishes the inclusive nature of Christ’s community that embraces those marginalized by mainstream society.¹³ These verses also make it clear that Christ’s followers – those who would look to His teachings to rectify the inequalities of the present – could expect to be hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to this Scripture is instructive of many things, including the inclusive mandate of the Bahá’í community. It also draws attention to the social conditions in the Americas at the time of the writing of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. In the early 20th century, racism – one of the prime causes of poverty, hunger, and weeping – was enshrined in law in the Americas, and those who would work for racial unity were not only hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed, but often murdered.¹⁴ For Bahá’ís, acceptance of and working for race unity – both within the Bahá’í community and in the greater society – was slow going and a great struggle particularly because at that time, as stated by historian Louis Venters, “majority public opinion and governmental policy at all levels were both running in precisely the opposite direction.” He continues, “Given the pervasiveness of white supremacy, nothing but the persistence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the consciences of individual Bahá’ís kept Jim Crow ideas and practices from taking hold in a nascent faith community.”¹⁵ The Beatitudes in their entirety are supportive of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s persistent guidance to attend to the principles and practices of inclusiveness and race unity – they succinctly state the spiritual

importance of the poor and disenfranchised, the standard of solidarity with the suffering and the oppressed, and the social ostracism one could expect by obeying this mandate.

Included in the Sermon on the Plain, immediately following the Beatitudes, are the “Woes.” These are verses that address those who would ignore or profit off of the suffering and the oppressed:

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. [Luke 6:24-26]

In a world that idealizes power, privilege, money, and status, and where “oppression and injustice toward the poor and the outsider are the universal norm,”¹⁶ the Beatitudes and the accompanying Woes are subversive — they turn the world upside down [Acts 17:6]. The message was revolutionary at the time of Christ and it is revolutionary today. The rich, the full, the satisfied, and those easily accepted by the old order “are challenged and made to face the consequences of their lot”¹⁷ — all are held to a spiritual standard in which being a follower of the Word of God requires hungering for justice, attending to the marginalized, being in solidarity with suffering and the oppressed, and acting on behalf of divine teachings regardless of the status quo. These verses establish that there are dire consequences for resting in one’s comfort zone. And lest one may be tempted to focus one’s energy in enmity to the oppressor instead of the empowerment of the oppressed, the verses following the “woes” in the Sermon on the Plain demand that all believers proactively love their enemies, despite the persecution they may endure:

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray

for those who abuse you.... Do to others as you would have them do to you. [Luke 6:27-28]

Continuing with the same theme, the next passage prohibits judging or condemning others and teaches, instead, forgiveness: “*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven*” [Luke 6:37]. The final section of the Sermon on the Plain starts out with a call for obedience attributed to Christ that may be the most poignant verse in the entire Gospel: “*Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?*” [Luke 6:46] There follows a parable on the necessity of obedience to the Word of God:

I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house. [Luke 6:47-49]

In brief, the Sermon on the Plain (that is, the larger context of the verse quoted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) establishes the absolute inclusive nature of the community of the faithful, the blessedness of the poor, the necessity of reaching out to the powerless and marginalized, the persecution to be expected when acting on behalf of these divine teachings, the hazards inherent in oppression and apathy, the right actions of love, forgiveness, and a nonjudgmental attitudes in any situation, and the necessity of obedience to the Word of God. All of this is evoked by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to the one verse from the Sermon on the Plain: “*Blessed are the poor...*” [TDP 6:12].

It should be of great interest to all the Bahá’ís in the Americas that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states the importance of bringing

the Word of God to the poor in four different ways in this Tablet. First, He quotes the verse from the Gospel of Luke that we have examined:

In short, O ye believers of God! Exalt your effort and magnify your aims. His Holiness Christ says: Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven.
[TDP no. 6:12]

Then He restates that Scripture in His own words:

In other words: Blessed are the nameless and traceless poor, for they are the leaders of mankind. [TDP no. 6:12]

Then He restates the same point with a quote from the Qur'an:

Likewise it is said in the Qur'an: "And We desire to show favor to those who were brought low in the land, and to make them spiritual leaders among men, and to make of them Our heirs." [Qur'an 28:5; TDP no. 6:12]

And then He restates that Scripture in His own words:

Or, we wish to grant a favor to the impotent souls and suffer them to become the inheritors of the Messengers and Prophets. [TDP no. 6:12]

Abdu'l-Bahá states the standard and then repeats it again, then again, and yet again. The guidance is clear: it is the Will of God that the poor be the "*spiritual leaders among men*" – the "*inheritors of the Messengers and Prophets*" – and it is incumbent upon all "*believers of God*" to "*Exalt your effort and magnify your aims*" in this regard. When one considers that "most of the people who have ever lived on this planet have been oppressed and poor,"¹⁸ the degree to which efforts in this regard must be magnified becomes apparent. And, as demonstrated above, the context of the Gospel verse that 'Abdu'l-Bahá references offers guidance on the manner in

which one must and must not approach this task, as well as an alert to the social ostracism that one might expect on this path.

“Go Ye Into All the World” [Mark 16:15]

In four of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to a certain call to action found in the New Testament. In the Tablet to the Northeastern States He writes:

It is stated in the blessed Gospel: Travel ye toward the East and toward the West and enlighten the people with the light of the Most Great Guidance, so that they may take a portion and share of eternal life. [TDP no. 1.3]

To the Southern States He refers to the same call to action in these words:

It is also mentioned in the Gospel: Travel ye to all parts of the world and give ye the glad tidings of the appearance of the Kingdom of God. [TDP no. 2.3]

Similarly, to the Western States ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

It is also recorded in the blessed Gospel: Travel ye throughout the world and call ye the people to the Kingdom of God. [TDP 4.4]

And to the United States and Canada He writes:

Christ says: Travel ye to the East and to the West of the world and summon the people to the Kingdom of God. [TDP no. 6.5]

All four of these statements are comparable to verse 16:15 in the Gospel of Mark: “*And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*” [Mark 16:15].¹⁹ As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicates,²⁰ this call to action is attributed to Christ. Of particular interest is that in Mark’s Gospel this

particular instruction was given by Christ and received by the Apostles *after* Christ's Resurrection.²¹

The Bahá'í understanding of Christ's Resurrection is that it was "*a true resurrection*" [SAQ 23.7], a spiritual awakening in the hearts of Christ's Apostles after the devastation of the crucifixion, after which they taught the Cause of Christ. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

We explain, therefore, the meaning of Christ's resurrection in the following way: After the martyrdom of Christ, the Apostles were perplexed and dismayed. The reality of Christ, which consists in His teachings, His bounties, His perfections, and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and had no outward appearance or manifestation – indeed, it was as though it were entirely lost. For those who truly believed were few in number, and even those few were perplexed and dismayed. The Cause of Christ was thus as a lifeless body. After three days the Apostles became firm and steadfast, arose to aid the Cause of Christ, resolved to promote the divine teachings and practice their Lord's admonitions, and endeavoured to serve Him. Then did the reality of Christ become resplendent, His grace shine forth, His religion find new life, and His teachings and admonitions become manifest and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ, which was like unto a lifeless body, was quickened to life and surrounded by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Such is the meaning of the resurrection of Christ, and this was a true resurrection. [SAQ 23.6-7]

Because the verse cited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá ("*And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" [Mark 16:15]) is set in the context of the Resurrection, inherent in this verse is the need to overcome perplexity,

dismay, and other paralyzing factors that can turn the Cause of the Manifestation into a “*lifeless body*” [SAQ 23.6]. A factor that often causes perplexity and dismay is past failure; therefore, it is interesting that the vast propensity for human failure is demonstrated in the Scripture preceding Mark 16. For example, in Mark 14 (the chapter that tells of the activities of Christ and the Apostles immediately before and during His arrest) it is told that the Apostles repeatedly failed to stay awake in prayer with Christ at the Garden of Gethsemane even though He asked them — three times — to stay awake [Mark 14:32-41]. With the immanence of the crucifixion, the Apostle Peter failed in His support of Christ by denying Him three times [Mark 14:66-72]. And, as predicted by Christ [Mark 14:27], all of His Apostles failed in their allegiance to Him and became “deserters” after He was arrested [Mark 14:50]. It is telling that Christ’s specially chosen Apostles are completely absent throughout the story of His arrest and crucifixion in Mark 15. Additionally, when the women who first experienced the Resurrection shared the living Reality of Christ with certain Apostles, the Apostles “*believed not*” [Mark 16:11]. It is to these Apostles — those who failed Christ in various ways in the past — who Christ calls to action and on whose shoulders the work of His Cause depends. In fact, in the Gospel story, right before Christ gives the call to action to His Apostles He upbraids them for their failings:

Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” [Mark 16:14-15]

One of the messages in this Scripture is that despite past and repeated human failure, those with eyes to see are still called upon to represent and teach the Word of God. As stated by New Testament scholar C. M. Tucket, Mark’s story implies that “failure can be and is overcome. The power of forgiveness and

restoration is in the end greater than human failure and its consequences.”²² The history of Christianity, today the most widespread religion in the world, testifies to the success of these original teachers despite their human failings.

Another theme inherent in Mark 16:15 is the need to take the teachings of the Manifestation of God everywhere – including hostile territory – and the inevitability of suffering in the path of teaching the Word of God. Although the Apostles became followers in the pastoral environment of the Galilee, an area that was relatively accommodating to Christ’s teachings, Christ never promised “a glorious, trouble-free existence.”²³ Earlier in the Gospel, Christ walked with the Apostles from Galilee to Jerusalem – the seat of authority and power that would reject His teachings. During the walk to Jerusalem He assured His Apostles that “*The cup that I drink you will drink*” [Mark 10:39]. Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem Christ was arrested, put on trial, mocked, tortured, and killed. Therefore, the mandate to “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*” [Mark 16:15] includes being prepared to teach in areas hostile to the Word of God and to endure persecution.

The Apostles to whom the Mark 16:15 call to action was addressed did rise to lives of teaching, travel, and persecution, as did thousands of early Christians. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

In the days of Jesus only a few individuals turned their faces toward God; in fact only the twelve disciples and a few women truly became believers, and one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot apostatized from his Faith, leaving eleven. After the ascension of Jesus to the Realm of Glory, these few souls stood up with their spiritual qualities and with deeds that were pure and holy, and they arose by the power of God and the life-giving breaths of the Messiah to save all the peoples of the earth. Then all the idolatrous nations as well as the Jews rose up in their might to kill the Divine fire that

had been lit in the lamp of Jerusalem. "Fain would they put out God's light with their mouths: but God hath willed to perfect His light, albeit the infidels abhor it" [2 Qur'an 9:33]. Under the fiercest tortures, they did every one of these holy souls to death; with butchers' cleavers, they chopped the pure and undefiled bodies of some of them to pieces and burned them in furnaces, and they stretched some of the followers on the rack and then buried them alive. In spite of this agonizing requital, the Christians continued to teach the Cause of God, and they never drew a sword from its scabbard or even so much as grazed a cheek. Then in the end the Faith of Christ encompassed the whole earth. [SDC 81]

According to the biblical context connected to Mark 16:15 discussed above, an enlarged understanding of that single verse, "*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation,*" may be understood as: Go, all of you whose souls have been resurrected by the recognition of the Word of God. Take with you all of your human inadequacies and, despite your past failures, go into all the world – including areas that are unfamiliar, deemed undesirable, or threatening – and proclaim the good news of the Word of God to the whole creation regardless of the suffering and persecution that you will, no doubt, endure on this path.

In light of the context of Mark 16:15, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, "*It is also mentioned in the Gospel: Travel ye to all parts of the world and give ye the glad tidings of the appearance of the Kingdom of God*" [TDP 2.3] is more than a general call to action; it includes acceptance of personal inadequacy, forgiveness of failure, a call for courage, and a reminder that sacrifice is integral to service in the Cause of God.

Reflections on the Value of Biblical Literacy in the Study of the Tablets of the Divine Plan

This brief overview of the contexts of four biblical verses referenced in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* demonstrates the richness that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá draws on while quoting the Bible. For example, when examined in the context of the entire Parable of the Sower, His statement “*When the pure seeds are scattered in the good ground heavenly blessing and benediction is obtained*” [TDP 3.3] includes alerts on barriers to spiritual progress as well as encouragement to be steadfast regardless of the outcome of teaching. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction to “*Shake off the very dust from your feet*” [TDP 8.11] not only draws on ancient biblical imagery symbolizing detachment, but, when understood in its full context, also makes the point that this “dust” includes all manner of severe tests and difficulties that may arise while spreading the Word of God. His use of the verse, “*Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven*” [TDP 6:12] evokes the entire Sermon on the Plain including its message of the Manifestation’s solidarity with the oppressed, the spiritual bankruptcy of haughty power, the inevitable persecution that arises when speaking out for the oppressed, the absolute necessity of forgiving and refraining from judging others, and an appeal for obedience to the Word of God. And when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in four different Tablets, refers to the Gospel call to action, “*Travel ye throughout the world and call ye the people to the Kingdom of God*” [TDP 4.4], we find that the greater context of that Scripture teaches the necessity of a resurrection of the Spirit in one’s heart, acceptance of multiple human faults, and the warning that courage will be needed to endure the sacrifice that is necessary when spreading the Cause of Justice. From a few words in black and white, each quotation leaps into multiple shades of color when the contexts are explored — when biblical literacy is expanded.

There are many secular arguments for increased biblical literacy. In the words of the Supreme Court, the Bible is “the world’s all-time best seller”²⁴ and has had a role in every major movement in Western Civilization.²⁵ Its imagery, idioms, themes, characters, and stories are infused in music, literature, and art from Beethoven to Garth Brooks, Shakespeare to Toni Morrison, and Michelangelo to Andy Warhol. For Bahá’ís there is another argument for biblical literacy: Bahá’í literacy and biblical literacy are intertwined. As seen in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often uses the language of the Bible in His instruction. It is of value to Bahá’ís to know that language in all of its richness in order to connect with the nuances of Bahá’í text delivered in the form of biblical references – something we see not only in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, but in the Writings of all of the Central Figures of the Faith. A brief search of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reveals over one hundred direct mentions of the Gospel, over one hundred and fifty direct mentions of Moses, and over two hundred direct mentions of Jesus Christ.²⁶ These numbers don’t include the many additional biblical allusions, quotations, prophecies, and references to biblical stories that can be found throughout the Bahá’í Writings.

In addition to accessing the richness of biblical references in the Bahá’í Writings, increased biblical literacy empowers one to have meaningful and distinctive conversations with friends from religious traditions who especially revere the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. As stated previously, in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá demonstrates that one way to communicate in the “*Collective Center of the sacred religions*” is to interweave sacred traditions in one’s discourse [TDP 14.11]. Familiarity with as well as love of such traditions, both of which are evidenced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, would be essential for sincerity in these conversations so vital to establishing “*affinity between the hearts of the world of humanity*” [TDP 14.9].

Questions for Further Study

Although not in the purview of this paper, this study brings up additional questions worthy of exploration including: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes reference to the Qur’an in ten of the fourteen *Tablets of the Divine Plan*²⁷ – how does knowledge of the contexts of the Qur’anic references enhance our understanding of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance? Many of His Qur’anic references are in combination with biblical references²⁸ – what insights can we glean from His interweaving of specific Qur’anic and biblical verses? In 1916-17, the recipients of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* were predominantly of Christian background and probably had little knowledge of the Qur’an – what does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s choice of Islamic verses tell of what He especially wanted the West to know about Islam? And finally, when studied in the entire context of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, in what way does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s use of biblical and Islamic references transform the conventional meanings of those traditions?

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NOTES

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá also integrates verses and images from the Qur'an in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Perhaps the Bible references were used because they were familiar to His readers; perhaps references to the Qur'an were used because His readers needed to develop familiarity with Islamic Scripture. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on biblical references.

² Note: *rûah* (Hebrew) and *pneuma* (Greek) can both be translated as breath, wind, or Spirit (Kieffer, p. 966).

³ See TDP 1.3; 2.3; 3.3; 4.4, 4.5; 5.2; 6.5, 6.6, 6.12; 7.3; 8.2, 8.11; 9.2; 10.9; 11.2; 12.4; 13.2, 13.7; 14.6, 14.10.

⁴ Prothero, p. 2, 38-39, 164; Gallup and Castelli, p. 60; Kwon

⁵ Prothero, p. 70; see also 79

⁶ Prothero, p. 164

⁷ Evans, William B. *The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Magazine* (March/April 2013, pp. 10-11) January 24, 2014.

⁸ George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Faith: American Faith in the 90's*. New York: Macmillan, 1989, p. 60.

⁹ Rohr, p. 16.

¹⁰ Also referred to as the “*heavenly armies*” (TDP 8.1), the “*armies of God*” (TDP 8.2), and “*Apostle of Bahá'u'lláh*” (TDP 8.4).

¹¹ The term beatitude comes from the Latin noun *be titūdō* which means “happiness.”

¹² The four Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Plain found in the Gospel of Luke are comparable in many ways to the eight Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:3-12.

¹³ See Franklin, p. 935

¹⁴ Venters, pp. 42, 47, 59, 75, 96, 99

¹⁵ Venters, p. 53

¹⁶ Rohr

¹⁷ Franklin, p. 935

¹⁸ Rohr

¹⁹ The publisher of *Tablets of the Divine Plan* indicates that all four of these statements are comparable to Mark 16:15. These verses also evoke a later passage in the same Gospel: “*And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation*” (Mark 16:20, sometimes placed after Mark 16:8, NRSV).

²⁰ See TDP 6.5

²¹ The story of the crucifixion and burial of Christ is found in Mark 15; the story of the Resurrection is found in Mark 16.

²² Tucket, pp. 991-992

²³ Tucket, p. 921

²⁴ Prothero, p. 167

²⁵ Prothero, p. 59, 167

²⁶ www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts

²⁷ TDP 1.3; 2.3; 4.3; 5.2; 6.12; 9.2, 9.3, 9.12; 11.2; 12.8; 13.2; 14.2, 14.10

²⁸ TDP 1.3; 2.3; 5.2; 6.12; 9.2; 14.10

Bahá'u'lláh and the Luminous Mind:

Bahá'í Gloss on a Buddhist Puzzle

Roland Faber

1: Non-Duality

The following considerations are an exercise in non-dual thinking.¹ Non-duality is of central importance to Buddhist thought and experience.² And if, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms, human essence reveals itself in thought (and mind) [PT 2], the core of which is mystical contemplation [PT 54], then the awareness of this profound mode of thinking (and experiencing) is not irrelevant to the spiritual existence of humanity. Non-duality is, however, often misinterpreted to exhibit monistic intentions, being the opposite of metaphysical dualism. If dualism, the simple differentiation between God (or ultimate Reality) and the world, is (wrongly or rightly) identified mostly with Abrahamic religions, from their perspectives (if dualism is adopted) monism stands as an accusation against Asian religious expressions, such as the Advaita Vedanta view in Hinduism,³ and against Buddhism in general.⁴ This opposition manifests itself as the impasse of an uncompromising alternative between the affirmation of the absolute difference between the world and God, on the one hand, and the inseparable unity of the world with ultimate Reality, on the other.⁵ Yet, it is precisely in this antagonistic

force field that Buddhist thought is already distorted and will be misrepresented if it is “identified” in this way, which often happens in the interest of an apologetic defense of seemingly unavoidable implications of Abrahamic notions regarding a “personal” God.⁶ Nevertheless, the current considerations want to demonstrate that neither of these mutually exclusive views is necessary or even necessarily true insofar as they are used to “identify” (or estrange) the religious other. As a matter of fact, non-dualism, which cannot only be found in Buddhism, but also in many mystical streams of Eastern and Western religious traditions (and their philosophical articulation) throughout all of their phases of existence, does not attach itself to either side – dualism or monism.⁷ Instead, by insisting on the *non-difference* between phenomenal reality and ultimate Reality, it begins at, and always reaches beyond, identity and difference, dualism and monism, transcendence and immanence, alike.⁸

Yet, there is one problem we must face from the outset when we try to understand the concept and reality of non-duality in the way it is actually meant to be operating in diverse religious systems, theoretically and practically. Since non-duality cannot be expressed in terms of difference, although it does also not comply to the terms of identity (of God and the world) either, the *expression* of non-dualism necessitates the use of a language that escapes both fallacies of identification and simple differentiation, but only for the price of following closer the semiotic conventions of a language that seems to be monistic, that is, a language of (seeming) identification.⁹ Especially since dualism, that is, the assumption of a *simple* difference between God and the world, appears to be the stronger adversary in the dual rejection of identity and difference (even linguistically), the language of non-duality needs some greater degree of sophistication for it to be discerned from monistic language, as it is rather clear that dualistic language does not capture the non-differential articulation of ultimate Reality from mundane reality in any intelligible way conceivable.

This can be demonstrated with one of the most important formulations of non-dualism in Western philosophy, although its potential Eastern background must not be ignored, and it can be found in various forms in Eastern thought and religious contexts, too.¹⁰ So is the statement “the All is one” seemingly monistic, as is the converse phrase “the One is all.” On the surface, they seem to be conveying not only the unity of the cosmos of all existence, but, especially in the reverse form, the divinity of this unity, be it named God or otherwise, and the One as being identical with everything. This formula was often (and sometimes falsely) accused of being pantheistic, where dualists and dualist understanding of the relationship of God and the world is concerned, or was even by some of its proponents affirmed in a pantheistic manner. However, even if such an accusation were true, although it is not, it already lacks the ability to address an “identity” of mundane reality with *God* where the concept of God is not utilized, as in Buddhism.¹¹ In any case, a closer look will reveal that both versions of this formula, in fact, exhibit neither a dualistic nor a monistic intention.

In one of its most iconic Western philosophical renderings, arising from the *Enneads* of great Egyptian philosopher Plotinus (ca. 204-270), the non-dual character of the meaning of these formulas should be readily evident: “The One is all things and no one of them; the source of all things is not all things; all things are its possession....” [*Enneads* V.2.1].¹² This is what the theosophical Sufi tradition, giving the same pair of formulas a “fitting” (although paradoxical) language, commonly refers to the “unity of Being” (*waḥdát al-wujúd*).¹³ As with other formulations that were based on mystical paradoxical language, such seeming “identity” of all beings with the One Being (God) was, in the Christian and Islamic orthodox context, habitually accused of heretical pantheism or monism. It happened to Meister Eckhart and al-Hallaj alike when they articulated their mystical unity with God in a language that seemed inevitably to imply the monistic identity of their own “being” with that of

the Godhead (*grunt*) or of ultimate Reality (*al-ḥaqq*), respectively.¹⁴ In the Islamic context, the instigation of this formula was ascribed to another seminal non-dual thinker: the great Andalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-2140 CE), with all the suspicion of heresy that followed his and his followers’ thought patterns. But, as William Chittick has demonstrated, neither did Ibn ‘Arabi, in fact, use this formulation nor has he meant his thought to be simplified in this monistic, pantheistic way.¹⁵ But differentiations often, and often systematically, do not play a role in *antagonistic* exchanges, especially if the feeling of the entitlement to religious superiority of their respective orthodoxy motivates them. And so, while even followers of this philosophy might, over time, not have withstood the transformation of the non-dual language of their masters into monistic simplifications, the monistic interpretation of the “unity of Being” became the basis for the dualistic alternative of an only *apparent* unity of the All and the One, proposed as phenomenal (not ultimate) and epistemological (not ontological) “unity of witnessing” (*waḥdát ash-shuhúd*), devised by the Indian Sufi sheikh and philosopher Shaykh Ahmad al-Faruqi al-Sirhindi (d. 1624), and which in typical Abrahamic manner was again closely identified with the view of the orthodoxy.¹⁶ One may sense this antagonism to be furthered by the *misidentification* of monistic with non-dual language, however. It tends to arise from the attempt of non-dualists to mold the intellectual discourse on conceptually unfathomable mystical experience, provoking an impasse for the irreconcilable alternative thought pattern of dualism, which again is only effective under the already presupposed *exclusion* of the non-dual alternative (while it is itself not in need to further any oppositional energies). What is more, one may in these antagonisms also see the cultural restraints and prejudices impacting the mutual view of the religious other. Al-Sirhindi, being of Indian descent and cultural heritage, might have read Ibn ‘Arabi in the context of, and in similarity with, formulations of Advaita Vedanta or Buddhist non-dualisms, which for a long time, at least effectively from Nagarjuna (ca.

150-250 CE) and Sankara (ca. 800 CE) and their interpretation of certain Buddhist Sutras and the *Upanishads*, were pregnant with many formulations that insinuated monistic “identity” (of ultimate Reality with the world), even while instead (often) aiming at non-duality — note, for instance, the supposed “identity” of *atman* with *brahman* or of *samsara* and *nirvana*.¹⁷

That even a clearly *orthodox* rendering of non-duality in the context of a “theistic” differentiation of God from the world is not only possible, but rather a necessity of sophisticated thinking that wants to do justice to the implications of theism can be perceived from the great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner’s (1904-1984) formulation of God’s relation to the world as neither dualistic nor pantheistic. In Rahner’s subtle discernment of an orthodox Christian understanding, we observe that it is not at all close to “a more popular form of *dualism* which places God and the non-divine simply as two things alongside each other.” And while “we say against pantheism that God and the world are different, this statement is radically misunderstood if it is interpreted in a dualistic way.” Instead, he adds that the “difference between God and the world is of such a nature that God establishes and is the difference of the world from himself, and for this reason he establishes the closest unity precisely in the differentiation.”¹⁸ Rahner, thereby, actually defines the non-dualism sought here precisely by articulating it as the mystery of the *divine non-difference from the world*. If God *is* the difference from the world (that is, is identical with this difference), God is so close to the world that, while the world is not God, there is *no difference “between”* God and the world.

I have, over the course of the last decades, made this non-difference — as it appears, for instance, in mystical thinkers such as Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa in the West — the center of my philosophical endeavor to understand the mystical unity articulated in philosophical and religious discourses across religions.¹⁹ In our current context, now, as this deep non-dualism is beyond *any* opposition of categories, it does

also allow for the pursuit of an interesting transreligious conversation between Abrahamic “theism” and Buddhist “non-theism” from a Bahá’í perspective – that is, the one limited by the perspective and training of the author and in no way claiming any religious authority in its interpretation – namely, one of which the author thinks that it would be deeply appreciative of the principle that difference (in thought and practice) should never become opposition.²⁰ That is, if we could, on closer investigation, also find a place for non-dualism and non-difference in Bahá’í thought.²¹ In what follows, I will be concerned with one of the most profound expressions of this non-dualism in the Buddhist universe of thought and experience: the *Luminous Mind*. Reading selected Bahá’í scriptural texts and their conceptual formulations as a non-dualistic commentary on this Buddhist concept, this resonant, intertextual interference will also reflect back onto the Bahá’í texts so as to let their mutual transreligious correspondence in the articulation of the mystery of ultimate Reality in relation to our universe become visible.²²

2: Why Buddhism?

The conversation with Buddhism is a fascinating and pressing question for the Bahá’í understanding of the unity of religions. Given the overwhelming diversity of conceptualizations within and between the existing manifold of religions, a responsible Bahá’í understanding of this multiplicity by, at the same time, positing a fundamental agreement of all religions, becomes challenging. Bahá’í discourse has suggested diverse sites for situating such a unity, for instance, in the common source (God or ultimate Reality), the convertibility of ethical attributes and activities engaged in the religious transformation of the human character, or the corresponding mystical core of all religions.²³ But Buddhism, it seems, must be viewed as the furthest frontier in any such endeavor to create or adopt a conceptuality so profoundly pervading that it could be considered sufficient in establishing this proposed unity of religions, *because* the Bahá’í

writings appear, on the surface, to be contradicting the Buddhist worldview, while, at the same time, confessing the Buddha to be of the same essential Reality inhering in all divine Manifestations.²⁴ The reasons for the challenge that Buddhism provides for the Bahá'í understanding of transreligious unity in this regard, can be found, first and foremost, in the fact that Buddhism does neither use (or is compatible to) the “theistic” language that Abrahamic (and partly also Hindu) traditions employ, nor submit the metaphysical categories in which its religious tenets are expressed to that of the philosophical patterns with which all Western religious traditions have been pervaded.²⁵ Rather than signaling an underlying unity, Buddhist language and spiritual intentions appear to be *fundamentally* different from that of Western and Abrahamic categories and inclinations: they do not entertain the concept of God, but rather deny its very meaningfulness; they do not contemplate revelation, but offer methods of enlightenment; they do not aim at a divine world, but suggest the exhaustion of all worlds; they do not express themselves through messages of a Prophet, but encourage the imitation of the experience of the Awakened One; they do not claim immortality for the soul, but the selflessness of pure existence.²⁶

Nor is Buddhism in any substantial way or detailed differentiation considered in Bahá'í scriptures.²⁷ We miss its expositions compared, for instance, with Christianity, especially in the many conversations 'Abdu'l-Bahá had with Christian audiences and in culturally Christian lands when he travelled to Europe and America between 1911 and 1913.²⁸ In the mind of contemporary Bahá'ís of that time, this must already have been a challenge, as we know of Western Buddhist to converse with 'Abdu'l-Bahá;²⁹ of the presence of Buddhist teachers in America and Europe at the same time the teachings of which were, like the Bahá'í message, available to any open-minded religionist;³⁰ and also of the presence of Buddhists at the originally interreligious conversations in the wake of the first World Parliament of Religions (1893) at Sarah Farmer's

Green Acre gatherings.³¹ Despite several important attempts to bridge the missing discussion, we still lack a developed body of literature (from either side) for an informed transreligious discourse. In any case, such a discourse would have to raise fundamental questions of how to proceed conceptually and methodically in order to gain a deeper understanding of, and to be enabled to realize, the Bahá'í imperative to contribute to the reconciliation of religions with their vastly different worldviews.³²

Myron Phelps, one of the Western Buddhist who became a Bahá'í remembers, when he visited Akká, 'Abdu'l-Bahá to have said that, compared with Christ and his circumstances, the Buddha “came to a part of the world where civilization was much more advanced, ... ripe in philosophical and metaphysical speculations”³³ so that his teachings had to mirror this sophistication. This is a very apt observation, and one that we should take seriously in our engagement with Buddhism from a Bahá'í perspective. In other words, it is not enough to conclude from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, at one point, that while the Buddha has taught the “unity of God” (the doctrine of *tawḥíd*), later Buddhism has lost contact to this original teaching (something 'Abdu'l-Bahá also says about Christianity) [SAQ 43], wherefore any conversation between Bahá'í and Buddhist conceptuality would basically be irrelevant since the original teachings are now obscured. Instead, we must match the sophistication of the Buddhist conceptuality in a fair Bahá'í conversation with historical and contemporary Buddhism(s); even more so since the sophistication of these Buddhist literatures (for Buddhists) not only reflect historical documents, but scriptures that, in concurrence with Bahá'u'lláh, exhort the power of the Word or Spirit present through them if we do not denigrate them — and we never should.³⁴

In fact, such a differentiated and non-oppositional approach will rather remind us of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's hint that, like the original doctrine of the Buddha, the “unity of God” (*tawḥíd*) is meant to overcome “vain imaginings” in addressing the mystical

inaccessibility of the unspeakable ultimate Reality [SAQ 82].³⁵ In the same way, the conceptual sophistication of the Buddha and Buddhist scriptures as well as the deep reflections of Buddhist holy figures and teachers throughout the centuries was meant to *eradicate* the trappings of the labyrinths of thinking and the clinging to any *oppositional* categorizations of reality (*samsara*), which the Buddha and the Dharma-tradition as a whole view as hindrance for the salvific effectiveness arising from the direct experience of ultimate Reality (*dharmakaya*).³⁶ We note similar warnings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá not to get lost in conceptual speculation, but instead, against all imitation and prejudices, to directly investigate Reality (*al-haqq*) [PT 3, 41; PUP 26; GWB 125]. In fact, this is a sign, common to the diverse religious traditions, of the workings of mystical non-dualism in our mind and heart: Non-dual thought is meant to *overcome* thought *altogether*.³⁷ However, the *process* that the Buddha suggests cannot proceed without an appropriately engaged and sophisticated *deconstruction* of these categories, which otherwise, that is, by simple denial, only would lead to reiterations of imaginative projections onto Reality instead of helping us to free ourselves from such limitations.³⁸ Such is the challenge that the Bahá'í discourse faces in the light of Buddhism, especially if it does want to remain true to its own universal imperative to *connect* the threads of all religious traditions.³⁹ For this endeavor to succeed, it must, hence, *also* deconstruct the limitations of Abrahamic religious habits of thought and Western philosophical categories, as far as they limit the deeper understanding of their own scriptures: first, not to subsume Buddhist concepts and methods under Abrahamic categories and intentions; second, not to simply apply its own scriptural categories uncritically by assuming that our limited interpretations, which have historically developed predominantly in Western contexts, can be supposed to be universally explicative of their meaning;⁴⁰ and, third, not to simply abandon the conceptual maze with which we are confronted in the serious conversation with any religion, but in rare degrees of sophistication with Buddhism, by just

“agreeing” that such a conceptual engagement was not of ultimate relevance anyway.

Serious attempts of Bahá’í investigations into Buddhism are not lacking. They are of different kinds and exhibit various degrees of awareness of the methodological, philosophical, and linguistic complexities of such a transreligious discourse. Roughly, I find four approaches to *comparison* in Bahá’í literature, generally situated in the methodological approaches to religious studies, comparative religion, and comparative theology, at work: contributions in the prophetic proof-text tradition, demonstrating from Buddhist texts that Bahá’u’lláh is the expected Buddha Maitreya (Jamshed Fozdar);⁴¹ comparisons of Buddhist and Bahá’í concepts in the interest of finding textual evidences for similarities and differences (Ian Kluge);⁴² comparisons with broadly Buddhist or common intellectual and spiritual schemes as points of reference for Bahá’í resonances (Moojan Momen);⁴³ and rare commentaries that use Buddhist conceptual frameworks to inform Bahá’í readings of their own writings (Juan R. Cole).⁴⁴

Another kind of access altogether begins with overarching questions of *religious pluralism*,⁴⁵ which is mainly conducted from within Christianity and often in light of the perceived otherness of Buddhism.⁴⁶ In the Bahá’í context, although it has not been developed beyond a few applications to Buddhism, this discourse concerns itself mostly with the fundamental axiom of the relativity of religious truth and its relevance for questions of relating theism or dualism to monism or non-theism (Moojan Momen).⁴⁷ Much more work must be done in this venue in order for Bahá’í contributions to be taken seriously in related interreligious discourses that have, until now, mostly excluded Bahá’í impulses — especially since institutional dialogue between religions, of which the Bahá’í Faith has been an active partner over the last twenty years, cannot substitute spiritual and intellectual dialogue.⁴⁸

While the relativity of religious truth — as it is a central Bahá'í axiom⁴⁹ — is helpful to address these issues of difference from a Bahá'í perspective, we must not take a shortcut, assuming that the discovered differences are confined to, or merely expressive of, only cultural and linguistic questions, that is, the *social* side of the teachings of diverse religions, which Bahá'í scriptures understand to be changing over time.⁵⁰ Rather, we will only have taken the Buddhist conversation partner seriously if we also develop a sensibility for the fact that the perceived discrepancies of Buddhist language and spiritual intention from Western (and even many Eastern) religious traditions and philosophical conceptualizations reach deep into the respective *spiritual* identity.⁵¹ Only then will we have addressed the challenge that such a conversation implies for the proposed claim of transreligious unity⁵² and will have mounted a serious attempt to reconciliation in a meaningful and respectful conversation between them. Otherwise, any such attempt to address these challenges will always potentially face resistance from within the Buddhist universe of discourse, namely, whenever the feeling could arise that such an attempt tries to establish superiority over Buddhism by controlling the dialogue or to claim its inclusion in a new universe (such as the Bahá'í universe) that would be perceived to be equal to the erasure of Buddhist identity and existence — a move that would also appear to be counter to Shoghi Effendi's understanding of the Bahá'í reconciliation of religions.⁵³

If I am, at least in principle, to name my own approach, here, it is meant to seek Bahá'í scriptural articulations of non-duality and to view them as a commentary on Buddhist concepts in their own context, thereby not only harvesting insights for a deeper understanding of Bahá'í concepts, but also yielding an access to the meaning of Bahá'í scriptures and categories for Buddhist conversation partners. As this oscillation also reflects back onto the Bahá'í texts, it has the fortunate side effect to instigate the widening of *their* interpretation beyond Western limitations and to seek the

mutual immanence of both religious traditions from the deeply mystical articulation of ultimate Reality.⁵⁴ This mutual transformation may, then, also become available as an appropriate *procedure* of establishing unity in a *non-dualistic* way, that is, beyond and counter to the simplifications and presupposed limitations of the dialectic of monism and dualism.⁵⁵

The main Buddhist concept that is brought into this conversation of mutual resonance, is, as already mentioned, that of the *Luminous Mind*. It will allow us to reflect back on Bahá'u'lláh's surprising rendering of the very same formulas, which we find already in Plotinus, in which non-dualism expressed itself in Western philosophical and religious discussions on the correlation of ultimate Reality to our world of becoming over the centuries. It will direct our attention to the resonance of Bahá'u'lláh's discussion of the concept of the *Uncompounded Reality*, which again will enable us to view it as a commentary on the Luminous Mind. The choice is not arbitrary; rather it reflects two of the deep designations of the Reality of Realities in both Buddhism and Bahá'í Faith.

3: The Luminous Mind

The concept of the Luminous Mind is a central Buddhist signification of ultimate Reality, Westerners would say: God; but also of the essence of human existence, Westerners might say: the soul; and the essence of cosmic reality, Westerners might say: the infinite worlds of God – all in one. Peter Harvey in his book *The Selfless Mind* found that the concept of the Luminous Mind already appears in early Buddhist sutras of the *Anguttara Nikaya* (1.8-10 & 10-11). There, it is called *pabhassara chitta* or “brightly shining mind,” exhibiting a (clear) light metaphoric, and in some of the texts it importunately also implies that *loving-kindness* is a central quality of this mind (*chitta*).⁵⁶ One of the central text formulates its meaning with a (for Western minds) highly paradoxical puzzle:

Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is defiled by incoming defilements.

Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is freed from incoming defilements.⁵⁷

Several important aspects arise from this enigmatic account: Mind is in and of itself of *pure* nature. This is indicated with its luminosity, clarity, or unobstructedness. Yet, mind is also *defiled*, that is, in the state of darkness, murkiness, obstructedness, which means, mind is in some state of illusion and suffering.⁵⁸ The commentary on the same sutra understands this “defilement” to mean that which one of the most basic Buddhist ascriptions to the origins of sufferings designates as the culprit: namely, attachment. Attachment, in its own turn, signifies the most profound processes and activities by which we are bound to the inescapable repetition of this suffering.⁵⁹ These are the fundamental hindrances to ever reach enlightenment and liberation in Buddhist analysis such as ignorance, hate, delusion and greed.

However, this is (at least for ears trained in Western categorizations) paradoxical: the Luminous Mind is not “fatally” bound to the repetition of attachment and its reasons that suggests the samsaric process; it *can* be freed from those defilements, those attachments, those modes of infliction and perpetuation of suffering, *because* it is already always free from defilements. An interesting puzzle emerges: In its purity, the Luminous Mind is (always and will always be) *untouched* by defilements and, hence, resides *always* in a natural state of luminosity and loving-kindness, *even while* it is defiled. This again is, in fact, the reason that the Luminous Mind *can* be freed from those defilements. The question is — how? The answer lies in what the Buddhist path of liberation is about, the eightfold path the ingredients of which are differently emphasized in the diverse Buddhist traditions.⁶⁰

In its development throughout the “three turnings of the wheel” from the early schools to Mahayana and Vajrayana, the Luminous Mind took on different, yet related functions, connected by, we could say, the Hermetic understanding of reality for which macrocosm and microcosm mirror each other. Hence, the Luminous Mind designates the non-dual “identity” of the Self, which is *anatta*, No-Self, the Self without substantial identity, with its cosmic non-substantial continuity beyond individual lives, also called *bhavanga* or mind-stream. It names the storehouse-consciousness or *alaya vijñana*, the root awareness of emptiness and all karmic seeds in the Yogacara. It expresses the Buddha-nature of all existence, the Buddha-seed or *thatagatagarba*. And it indicates the absoluteness of ultimate Reality, which is inexpressible, and is called *dharmakaya* or the Dharma-body of the Buddha.⁶¹ In its final appreciation, the Luminous Mind began to hold the key to the *essence* of Buddhist doctrine, experience, and Reality within Tibetan Buddhism as treasured by Dzogchen or the “Great Perfection” with which I will be concerned further here.

Dzogchen or Atiyoga is taught and practiced in all four classical lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, but especially harbored as the treasure of the Old School or Nyingma. Dzogchen understands itself as the highest and unsurpassable teaching of the Buddha. Being beyond all other Buddhist paths, it indicates the ultimate secret of the Buddhist Dharma.⁶² In this context, the Luminous Mind of Dzogchen indicates Reality itself, its awareness, and the path for attaining both of them, at once.⁶³ Most importantly, however, it is in its core, and can only be fathomed if we understand it to be, the expression of *radical non-dualism*.

Dzogchen, or the path of Great Perfection, concurs with earlier renderings of radical non-dualism, for instance, of the *Heart Sutra*. In this sutra, Avalokitesvara, the great Bodhisattva (but really the Buddha) of compassion, gains insight into ultimate Reality as that which in its “essence” is utterly empty (of self-existence), that is, that which has no “essence” that

could in any form be expresses as this or that, such that even form (structure, character, organization, energy) and emptiness (the formlessness itself) are *the same*.⁶⁴ Dzogchen builds also on the radical view of Madhyamika, which became famous (even in the West) for Nagarjuna's, the great Buddhist sage's and philosopher's, "equation" for which there is *no difference* between *samsara* and *nirvana*.⁶⁵ This radical non-duality is the essence of what Buddhists call the perfection of wisdom, *prajnaparamita*, elaborated in the notion of emptiness or *sunyata*.⁶⁶ And Dzogchen is, in its own understanding, the Great Perfection of *this* Wisdom that arises in (but always is already) *the pristine, luminous, empty, all-relational, spontaneous consciousness* (or *chitta*) *beyond any duality*, be it of subject or object, perceiver or perceived, phenomenal or ultimate, relative or absolute, *samsara* or *nirvana*, the temporal or the eternal. This *chitta* is not a regular "mind," which is always bound to the defiled state in which the dualism between these realities seems to be real and that even creates them as oppositional "realities." The Luminous Mind is the enlightened mind, the "*chitta* beyond *chitta*" — the essence and natural state of the mind and the essence of existence.⁶⁷ This Reality *is* the Buddha. In Dzogchen, this Reality, which is also *our* true identity, is experienced in the unperturbed presence of the "now," called *rigpa*; and in this experience, it releases the awareness of radical non-duality: that *the All is one*, and that *the One, the Buddha, is all*, as all (the All) exhibits the Buddha-nature.⁶⁸

A few contemporary textual witnesses will support the understanding of this non-dualism *as* non-dualism, that is, sufficiently clear so as for us not to fall into the trap of confounding it with a strict monism of simple "identity," which, to say it again, would already be a reaction to a mindset that presupposes dualism as natural state of existence and the operation of the mind — something that Buddhism strictly wants to overcome — but as genuine alternative to both dualism and monism in which the enlightenment experience consists.⁶⁹

In his book on *Sufism and Buddhism*, Yousef Daoud describes the Dzogchen view, which he relates to Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of ultimate Reality or God or *al-ḥaqq*, in these terms:

Everything that is, is interconnected. What lies behind it, hidden by a veil of our cognition and deluded consciousness, is Buddha-nature (dharmata) or the absolute reality of pure, enlightened Mind: dharmakaya, the experience of which is called bodhichitta. It is eternally abiding, unchanging, uncreated, and beyond our world of becoming.⁷⁰

Here, the Buddha-nature is the pure, enlightened Mind; and it is ultimate Reality. Its “character” compares with that of ultimate Reality or God (*al-ḥaqq*) in Sufism,⁷¹ indicating the “essence” of God as eternal, uncreated, but also as all-relational.

In the *Supreme Source Tantra*, one of the central scriptures of Dzogchen, *dharmakaya* (ultimate Reality as the Dharma-body of the Buddha) even speaks as “person” in the first person account of the Buddha Samantabhadra: “I am self-arising wisdom that has existed from the beginning.... I am the supreme source of everything, pure and total consciousness.”⁷² It is here that the two non-dual formulas appear in their most dense form: “The ineffable is the ultimate nature of existence: the ineffable essence is one. One is the supreme source, pure and total consciousness. The phenomena of creation are duality.”⁷³ The voice of Samantabhadra then explains further that

As the essence of mind, the fundamental substance, I am the source of all phenomena. ‘Supreme,’ refers to self-arising wisdom, the supreme maker that gives rise to all phenomena of existence. ‘Source’ refers to the ‘creator.’ ... ‘Total’ means that self-arising wisdom, the true essence, permeates and pervades the whole animate and inanimate universe.⁷⁴

Here, we find ultimate Reality to be understood as “creator” of the phenomenal world, but in its “essence” being all-relational, pervading the All, and without being any of the phenomena. It is the One of the All, and All-in-One. And it appears in the “personal” voice, while it is beyond any description.

Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, one of the primary living masters of Dzogchen, comments on the *Supreme Source Tantra*, saying:

Self-arising wisdom, the essence of all the Buddhas, exists prior to the division of samsara and nirvana and is beyond the limits of transmigration and liberation. As it ... is intrinsically pure, this original condition is the uncreated nature of existence ..., the ultimate nature of all phenomena. It cannot be identified with a stable and eternal substance ... and is utterly free of all the defects of dualistic thought.... It is given the name ineffable [because it is] ... beyond the conceptual limits of being and non-being.... Self-arising wisdom, primordially empty, is in the condition similar to space, and it pervades all beings without condition, from glorious Samantabhadra down to the tiniest insect on a blade of grass. For this reason that total state of dharmakaya, the inseparability of the two truths, absolute and relative, is called the “primordial Buddha.”⁷⁵

The absolute and the relative are non-different. Ultimate reality is all-encompassing and all-pervading, immanent and transcendent. It is beyond any simple differentiation of the relative world of *samsara*, as it is all-relational, *and* the absolute transcendence of *nirvana*, as it is all-encompassing. Its “name” is ineffable. As such, it is the uncreated essence of existence, while not being “identical” with anything of which it indicates the pure nature of its being. Reality is Consciousness, but this consciousness is neither caught in the dualistic opposition of subject and object nor caught in the illusion of the simple identity of subject and object. It is beyond the difference of

identity and difference. It is the consciousness that *is* non-different from anything.

One of the greatest masters of radical Dzogchen of all times, the Tibetan Nyingma teacher and (considered as the) manifestation of the Mahabodhisattva Manjushri, Longchenpa (1308-1364), in his fourteenth century *Treasury of the Dharmadhatu*, begins his first chapter with this poem on the Luminous Mind:

Everything arises in the vast matrix of spontaneity
 And Spontaneity is the ground of everything,
 But empty in essence, never crystallizing.
 The ground is nothing although it appears as everything.
 Samsara and Nirvana arise as spontaneity in the trikaya
 matrix ...
 It is the creativity of the luminous mind...
 Being nothing at all, yet appearing as everything
 whatsoever ...
 In its sameness it is the dharmakaya of luminous mind;
 ... empty of self, unchanging, unsublimating,
 ... self-sprung awareness in the now, reality itself⁷⁶

Here, the Luminous Mind is clearly indicative of ultimate Reality (*dharmakaya*); the non-difference between relative and absolute, *samsara* and *nirvana*; and, most importantly, it does not passively hide in its detached “rest,” but moves as pure “activity” or spontaneity or creativity. To be creative, here, is not an illusion, and to hold detachment and creativity *together* in one non-dual consciousness is the *original* nature of the mind – in all of us.

In his *Instructions on the Nonduality of Dzogchen*, Tulku Pema Rigtsal elaborates accordingly:

[W]hen we understand that... affirmation and negation of nirvana and samsara... are merely elaborate mental concepts, we realize that all discursive concepts are empty in themselves and are the sameness of reality itself. There is no view and meditation more profound than this.⁷⁷

Primal awareness, free of dualistic perception, is called "luminous mind."... [T]he essence of the nature of mind is uncompounded and immutable. The primal awareness that is the true nature of mind is profound clarity... eternal life....⁷⁸

This gives us deep confidence on the difference between Buddha and sentient being. Repeating ... Longchenpa's The Treasury of the Dharmadhatu Recognition of the nature of mind is Buddha; in the absence of that recognition, we remain deluded and sentient beings.⁷⁹

In this exposition, it is clear that both the conceptualizations of immanence and transcendence, the Absolute and the Relative, affirmation and negation, are *constructions* of the mind. Nor is *nirvana* "in itself" the unconstructed Reality, the assumption of which would indicate another dualistic "identification" of the "essence" of Reality. Only in the overcoming of even *that* construction of the unconstructed do we gain a glimpse of the non-duality that is intended: that which is *nothing* and, hence, is not different from anything; that which is *everything*, yet, by being nothing at all, cannot be identified or named, or differentiated; that which is *one*, even *the One*, as it is the inexpressible unity of the All (and everything in it), and, yet, is closer to everything than the "self-identity" of anything with itself.

The puzzle of the Luminous Mind, as presented throughout these texts, confronts us with at least three complex or paradoxical questions. First, how can the Luminous Mind be pure, undefiled, *while* being defiled? In this paradox is based the Dzogchen view that the *way* toward, and the *aim* of, liberation

are the same. In fact, given the ancient teachings of the Buddha, this means that there is *no way to bridge samsara* in order to reach *nirvana*, because *we are already there and of its nature*.⁸⁰ Second, how can the Luminous Mind be both the relativity and absoluteness, or *samsara* and *nirvana*, at once? In this paradox is based the Dzogchen view that there are *two modes* of the Luminous Mind: on the one hand, it is the realization of *emptiness* (being nothing, or empty of Self) and, on the other hand, it names the realization of unobstructed *creativity* (being everything), which functions are called *trekcho* and *togal*, respectively.⁸¹ Third, how can *samsara* and *nirvana*, relative and absolute, emptiness and creative arising, be non-dually *one*, the One who is named the Buddha, the Buddha realm (*Dharmadhatu*), pure radiant spaciousness, pure emptiness, Samantabhadra, the primal Buddha, yet, *before* dualism and monism? In this paradox is grounded the Dzogchen view that ultimate Reality is *beyond* our dualistic interpretation of the One and the multiplicity of existence, but also their mutual identification. Instead, the One Beyond is the All-One.⁸²

4: Productive Interference

In relation to the Bahá'í writings, we find a plethora of resonances with these witnesses of the Luminous Mind. We could talk about the linguistic serendipity that the Sanskrit word *bha*, luminosity, enshrined in its concept as *pabhassara chitta*, is also implied in the Arabic root of *bahá'*. Although unrelated, they have virtually the same meaning of light, ultimacy, brightness, and purity, releasing the resonances of the light-metaphoric of Buddhist and Bahá'í scriptures.⁸³

Additionally, one is immediately reminded of the utilization of this luminosity in Sufi and Illuminist traditions within Islam and their counterparts in Indian, Chinese and East Asian Buddhist schools.⁸⁴ Note the closeness of the *nur muhammediyyah*, the Muhammedan light of Ibn Arabi and Persian metaphysics of Suhrawardi and Mullá Sadar al-Dín

Shirazi,⁸⁵ in a sense the counterpart to the Greek and Christian Logos, the manifest aspect of the invisible and inaccessible Reality of God,⁸⁶ to the light imagery expressed, for instance, by Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light,⁸⁷ or, in Dzogchen, by Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha, who personifies the Luminous Mind, and who/which is called by its nature the “Immutable Light.”⁸⁸

We could, of course, with equal interest, also immerse ourselves more into the implications of the concept of *chitta*, mind, and its relation to the Bahá'í understanding of the Primal Mind, or Will, or Manifestation [SAQ 53],⁸⁹ nurtured by a long tradition through Jewish, Hellenistic, Christian and Islamic (religious) philosophy in the interchange of Greek, Persian and Indian thought patterns. We would find deep resonances with similar concepts in the Jewish and Hellenistic Wisdom Literature, Philo of Alexandria, Heraclitus's and again St. John's Logos, but also the Stoic Pneuma, and, Aristotle's and Plotinus's First Intellect. It would be worthwhile to investigate the astonishing non-duality of some of these concepts of the manifest Reality of the unknown essence of the Godhead, for instance, the oneness of its all-encompassing and all-pervading nature, with the Báb's, Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's insistence that both this transcendence and immanence are indicative the *same* ultimate Reality.⁹⁰ We could also think deeper of the consequences that the intellectual and material nature of the Spirit in some of these traditions finds a reflection in the Báb's characterization of the Primal Will as “matter” and activity and its non-dual indifference from the Divine Purpose as the origin of all “forms” of existence.⁹¹ Arising from the Shaykhi process philosophy of the pure activity of the Primal Will,⁹² we could find astonishing connections with the Buddhist non-duality of form and emptiness, eternal rest and infinite spontaneity, *samsara* and *nirvana*. In fact, given the theme of my transreligious considerations, I will take up this line of thought with the

maybe most profound aspect of the Luminous Mind, namely its *radical non-duality*. Let me elaborate with six related points:

First, the indicator of non-dualism in Buddhist thought, and, I would claim, also in the Bahá'í writings, is, as already stated, non-difference. Since it is often simply named *Oneness*, it is easy to miss that it is not the same as identity, or simply difference from (the differentiations of) multiplicity. Instead, it means that Reality is *not composed* and, hence, cannot be explicated in any analysis or construction. Construction is the sign of attachment from which the Buddhist path wants to liberate all sentient beings.⁹³ It is the *illusion* of “reality” and indicates the incapability of *samsara*, the cyclical bind of causality, of birth and death, of becoming and perishing. Composition and decomposition are the signs of the *defiled* mind. Hence, Buddhist analysis of this defilement, its reasons, and the suffering they cause, whether philosophically in reflection of the intellectual mind or practically in the immediate insight gained (in general) by meditation, aims at demonstrating that any *substantial* unity, such as the possessiveness of self-identical Self, can, in fact, be analyzed into components, which never lead to any self-subsisting base or un-composed oneness and, hence, exhibits *only* impermanence.⁹⁴

Yet, as the Buddha affirms in a famous and often quoted statement in *Udana 80:18* of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* in the Theravada *Sutta Pitaka*, there is a way out of the samsaric reality of impermanence. There is salvation from its inherent suffering, created by attachment. There is a way beyond this ignorance. The reason is that there is — as in the Bahá'í writings⁹⁵ — an *Uncompounded Reality*, which is without (and before) construction and change, and that is what *nirvana* means.⁹⁶ Since this Reality is beyond all composition, it is also beyond any *conceptual* construction, that is, it is beyond the inherent duality of thought.⁹⁷ In this sense, it is non-duality itself. *Therefore*, it is inconceivable, imperceptible, and inaccessible. It is at once Reality itself, but also *experienced* in

the realization of the emptiness of all composed appearances, and it communicates the immediate bliss of cessation in perfect calmness.

Second, as this “uncompounded Reality” *excludes* dualism and monism alike, its non-difference can neither be expressed by substantial oneness nor by duality. Nevertheless, in order not to fall back into monistic and dualistic patterns, it must, paradoxically, be expressed *as both at once*: as inaccessible oneness *and* an infinite manifold.⁹⁸ As Yousef Daoud with regard to Sufi-Buddhist dialogue confirms: If we seek God or ultimate Reality, we must do both at one, cease to name Reality, that is, accept that the Reality of God appears in no name *and*, as we must articulate (and realize) this namelessness, we must do so in the irreducible infinite multiplicity of different names and attributes.⁹⁹ Nagarjuna expresses this same insight as the non-difference of *samsara* and *nirvana*.¹⁰⁰ It is a consequence of the uncompounded nature of ultimate Reality that Reality cannot appear in mere difference *from* composed reality, but neither as the identity *of* it. Since uncompounded Reality is beyond all conceptuality, it cannot be named, but no name can be different from it either. This is also the secret of Plotinus’s scheme of emanation of which Michel Sells has made this most interesting analysis: While the apophatic One emanates the Intellect as its (first) manifestation, *it is not different from it*, as long as the Intellect “looks into” the undifferentiated One. Only when the Intellect “looks at” itself it creates difference, the difference of Self, which – similar to the Báb’s and Bahá’u’lláh’s renderings of this relationship between unmanifest and manifest Reality – is still the Self of ultimate Reality.¹⁰¹ And from this movement of the Intellect, for Plotinus, creation springs. We find ample evidence for this logic in the Bahá’í writings: from the adaptation of the Islamic ḥadīth “He who knows himself hath known his Lord”¹⁰² by all of the central figures of the Bábí-Bahá’í religions – which, following Henry Corbin, has its own history with Ibn ‘Arabi¹⁰³

— to statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the non-difference of the Self from the Manifestations.¹⁰⁴

Third, regarding the characterization of the universal manifest Reality of the Godhead or the Primal Will or Mind, which the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh identify with the Primal Manifestation, the same logic prevails in Bahá’u’lláh’s assertion of the *non-dual unity* of unmanifest Divinity with its Primal Manifestation.¹⁰⁵ In his *Commentary on a Verse of Rumi*, for instance, Bahá’u’lláh designates this *indistinction*: “*the essence of belief in Divine unity*” as it regards “*Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same*” [GWB 84].¹⁰⁶ This does, of course, not imply any monistic identity of unmanifest and manifest Reality, of Manifestation and the Godhead, which is not only clear from countless apophatic passages in Bahá’u’lláh, even from the same tablet, but also from the non-dualistic *logic itself* by which Uncompounded Reality is *indifferent (in itself) to* and, hence, *non-different from* its manifestations [SWB 58].¹⁰⁷ This again corroborates Plotinus’ and Nagarjuna’s, as well as Dzogchen’s, understanding of the Luminous Mind.

Fourth, the same logic also underpins Ibn ‘Arabi’s speculation on the nameless oneness of God as it expresses itself in infinite attributes. An attribute of God has *no “identity” in itself*, but only as it inheres *in the essence* of God, the Reality from which all attributes are non-different.¹⁰⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicates the same thought, which, thereby, reveals its non-dualistic intention, when he confirms that in God’s essence *there are no attributes distinct from it* [SAQ 37]. Yet, as this divine essence is inaccessible *to* these attributes, their *unity* is always *beyond* themselves.¹⁰⁹ In Buddhist terms, this affirms their *essential emptiness*.¹¹⁰ As these attributes, for Ibn ‘Arabi and Bahá’u’lláh alike, are most perfectly *mirrored* in the Primal Manifestation,¹¹¹ *it is their unity*, although the Self of the Primal Manifestation is itself *empty of substantiality*

[GWB 22],¹¹² except being the Self *of* the essence in which the attributes are indistinct [PM 54, 176].

As for Longchenpa all phenomenal existence is only a creative dream of the Luminous Mind (as long as it is not reiterated in dualistic oppositions of subject and object), so is for Ibn 'Arabi all existence only "realized" as it manifests the attributes of God in actualization.¹¹³ As for Longchenpa, so for Ibn 'Arabi and Bahá'u'lláh, all is empty of self-existence (as only the unmanifest God emphatically exists); and it is this emptiness (*sunyata*) which is the Self of the Buddha or the Primal Manifestation.¹¹⁴ And as for Longchenpa as well as for Mahayana traditions in general the root-expressions of this Reality of the Luminous Mind, the Buddha, are *wisdom* of emptiness and *compassion* of non-difference,¹¹⁵ in Ibn 'Arabi its root-attributes are divine *knowledge* and *mercy*.¹¹⁶ However, while this is also true for the Bahá'í writings [PM 99, TB 118], it may be interesting to note that in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure"* the root attributes of divine manifestation and creation are *Love* and *Beauty*¹¹⁷ — and we may wonder as to the implications of this shift for a Bahá'í commentary on the Luminous Mind.

Fifth, the logic of non-difference has another consequence: We must not confound, as already mentioned earlier, *language* utilizing the Greco-Islamic heritage by the Bahá'í conceptuality with its *meaning*, as if Greek thought defines the meaning of the Bahá'í writings for us. Not only does Bahá'u'lláh warn us that revelation is not exhausted by any linguistic mold (or language as such);¹¹⁸ and as it is always relative to its diverse audiences,¹¹⁹ it functions much like the "skillful means" (*upaya*) of Buddhist scripture by which the Buddha addresses each sentient being according to its spiritual horizon.¹²⁰ But the influx of Shaykhí and Sufi terminology in Bábí-Bahá'í scripture, as their "genetic language code" is not exclusively bound by Western patterns of substantialism and often presents alternatives to it,¹²¹ relieves us of the assumption that we are

bound by dualistic Greek categories, or even that we must defend them against Buddhist non-duality.

Case in point is the conjecture, held by some Bahá'í scholars, that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá use the categories of "essence" and "attribute" in an Aristotelian substantialist manner.¹²² Yet, in light of Ibn 'Arabi and Longchenpa, this proves to be not an inescapable conclusion to make. If we care to be open to a Buddhist reading of these categories, a very interesting insight will surface: namely, that for both Bahá'í and Buddhist thought "essence" is *inaccessible in principle* [SAQ 120-121]. As Roger Corless has demonstrated: While in Aristotelian lore, the underlying dualistic substantialism of Aristotle's philosophy seems to imply that we *can* know the unknowable essence of God, and really the essence of anything, *to some extent* through its inherent attributes, the Buddhist non-dualism asserts that *there is no essence that could be differentiated from its attributes*. And this means that no "essence" can be *identified* (which presupposes dualism) or, more cautiously: It is not that there is no essence, but that it is *intrinsically inaccessible*.¹²³ In this sense, we must say that the uncompounded Reality is inaccessible — period.¹²⁴ In Buddhist terms, this allows for the mutual emptiness of all *dharma*s, and of them with the inaccessible, but indistinct essence, which then connotes *emptiness itself*, the Self of emptiness, the Buddha.¹²⁵

Sixth, the anthropological implications of this don-dualism, already hinted at earlier, should now become obvious if we take into account the Bahá'í and Buddhist resonance of the Hermetic mirroring of the universal Reality or Mind and our mind or self or soul. I agree with Fozdar's analysis on this point: that the Bahá'í concept of the soul, including related concepts such as the heart (*qalb*) or the secret (*sirr*),¹²⁶ mirrors the Buddhist concept of the mind or *chitta* [PM 114]. And it does so precisely *not* in its Western, Aristotelian, dualistic sense, as Bahá'ís, at least in the West, might be inclined to think of the soul's reality: namely in dualistic opposition to the body (simple, non-relational immortality)¹²⁷ and, more importantly, here, in terms

of a dualistic consciousness that is not able to overcome the samsaric illusion of the opposition of subject and object,¹²⁸ although this transformation is essential to mystical consciousness in any religious tradition¹²⁹ and is, in fact, an empirical reality.¹³⁰ Instead, non-dual consciousness would have to be understood in the non-dual sense of being *beyond* simplistic monism and dualism. Its reality is like the Luminous Mind (which is its very nature) a *chitta non-chitta*, beyond all grasping of images and concepts, formless, beyond imaginings and self-projections, being the pure awareness of *itself as it*, as uncompounded Reality [SWAB 47]. To this testifies not only 'Abdu'l-Bahá's direct claim that the soul *is not composed* and, hence, eternal [PT 29]. It is, moreover, deeply engrained in Bahá'u'lláh's understanding of the soul, for instance, in his *Commentary on "He who knows himself knows his Lord,"* as that which (as the rational soul) analyzes everything in its constructedness, but can itself not be analyzed in such a way, and, hence, is a secret to itself and as such a sign of God [GWB #82]. In its purity-uncompoundedness-eternity, it is — as Bahá'u'lláh [GWB #80] and 'Abdu'l-Bahá [PT 110] state alike — untouched by any kind of limitations and debilitations, like the Luminous Mind. As it cannot be known in its essence, it is also empty of Self, or its Self is beyond itself; and to know oneself *as such* is to know God, as both are apophatically indifferent [GWB #1, 49]. As the soul or human mind is all the divine attributes [GWB #27], that is, as they are its very reality, its reality again mirrors, or better, is indifferent from the reality of the Primal Manifestation. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Makatíb-i Abdu'l-Bahá*, declares that "*the Primal Will which is the Universal Reality ... becomes resolved into the innumerable forms*"¹³¹ such that we are *like waves of one ocean*. This is also true for the Luminous Mind: the universal *dharmakaya* is the "essence" of our very being such that we are already always the Buddha *in nuce*, the *thatagatagarba*, of Buddha-nature. It is the secret of the Luminous Mind, that we *are* already this purity, *although* in ignorance defiled, as it is the secret of the Bahá'í understanding of soul-mind-heart that it is already always the

brightly shining sun even if it seems to be hidden under the clouds of limitation and infliction [GWB #80].

5: Uncompounded Reality

We can now relate this non-dualism to a tablet of Bahá'u'lláh that, in my view, represents one of the most interesting sites for a Bahá'í gloss reflecting the Luminous Mind as well for the transreligious Bahá'í discourse with Buddhism in general: the *Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqíqa* or the *Tablet on the Uncompounded Reality*.¹³² It can function as commentary on the Luminous Mind, because it reflects its “characteristics”: that *all is one* and that *the One is all*; that Reality must be understood in a non-dualistic way; and that the language used to indicate its mystery (*al-ḥaqq*) is not fixated on either its monistic expression, a field of spacious emptiness, or a theistic one, the Thou of a personal God.¹³³ As with the ultimate Buddha Samantabhadra, who is the Luminous Mind itself and its Self, in this tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, *al-ḥaqq*, ultimate Reality, can be expressed as both while being beyond any such annotation.¹³⁴

Bahá'u'lláh's tablet is itself a commentary.¹³⁵ It elaborates ultimate Reality by way of relating it to the seemingly monistic maxim, affirmed by the theosophical Sufi tradition in the wake of Ibn 'Arabi and Mullá Sadra, commonly referred to as *waḥdát al-wujúd* or unity of being and opposed by al-Sirhindi's *waḥdát ash-shuhúd* or unity of appearance, by taking this opposition back to its roots in the ancient non-dualistic formula, already expressed in Plotinus and even much earlier in the *Upanishads* as well as in Dzogchen, namely: that *the One is all things*. Bahá'u'lláh answers the confusion that issued from this ancient non-dualism and its erroneous confounding with monism or pantheism, as it was discussed in the Islamic philosophical disputes, especially, in the concrete context of Bahá'u'lláh's tablet, in and after the great Persian philosopher Mullá Sadra.¹³⁶ In this way, Bahá'u'lláh's discussion of the non-dualistic

formula indirectly comments on all the characterizations of the Luminous Mind that we have discovered so far. First of all, we must acknowledge, as the maybe most important observation from which all else will follow, that Bahá'u'lláh's answer in the tablet begins with the *affirmation* of the formula of Plotinus that "the One is all things," indicating its relevance for a Bahá'í understanding of non-dualistic argumentation as well as its Buddhist connotations.¹³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, then, goes on to give basically four arguments *for* the truth of this formula while, at the same time, releasing its *non-dualistic* understanding and safeguarding it against *both* its monistic *and* dualistic misconstruction. Here are Bahá'u'lláh's four arguments:

The first argument: Bahá'u'lláh takes the formula apart by interpreting their parts for themselves in a non-dualist manner. He renders "all things" not as meaning "all phenomena," but as indicating *all the divine attributes: they* must be viewed as the "essence" or "nature" of all phenomenal beings. That is, the phrase "all things," here, indicates the *pure reality* of all existents.¹³⁸ Further, Bahá'u'lláh takes "the One" of the formula to mean the *Uncompounded Reality* itself in which these attributes *indistinctly inhere while being its emanations*.¹³⁹ Like the Luminous Mind, the *reality* of all things is not their phenomenal existence, but the *purity* of their essential nature, which is constituted by the divine attributes as that which is realized when "all things" realize themselves. As with the puzzle of the Luminous Mind, in Bahá'u'lláh's view, while all things are already pure in their nature (the divine attributes that makes them real), all else is only illusion, vain imaginings, unreality, defilement, and attachment [GWB #100 136; HW Arabic #11, #13, #22]. Their reality again is *empty* since it has no self-existence either. What is more – as the more unexpected implication of non-duality rather than monism: As the *reality* of the divine attributes (which are the reality of all things) is itself *beyond* themselves, they are, like the Reality of the Luminous Mind, *empty of Self*, inhering in the Self of God, which is the Primal Manifestation. Yet, the manifest Self of God is itself again

empty of Self, as it finds its “nature” only in and through the inaccessible, apophatic essence of God.¹⁴⁰ And, finally, to close the non-dual circle: Without any dualistic differentiation (or even opposition) and without any monistic identification, we must now also say that the essence of God is again *empty of Self* as it has no “essence” that can be differentiated from its attributes or identified with anything and, hence, cannot be differentiated from (although it *is* the difference from) its Self, the manifest God, which again means that it cannot be differentiated from “all things” of which its attributes are their non-dual nature.

The second argument: Bahá’u’lláh *affirms* the non-dualistic *meaning* of this formula already simply by *quoting* Plotinus, probably as inherited by the discussion of it in Mullá Sadra. It means what it conveys: that although the One *is* all things, it is, at the same time, *none* of them. Thereby, Bahá’u’lláh equally affirms identity and difference; or stated differently: Bahá’u’lláh affirms that the Reality of all things can neither be grasped as identical with all things nor as different from them. It is apophatically, inexplicably beyond both identity and difference. Yet, as it manifests itself in them, Reality must always be addressed with both the *seeming* “identity” of apophatic oneness and the *seeming* difference of the multiplicity of all names and attributes. This insight is virtually indistinguishable from the meaning of the Luminous Mind, who/which must also always be expressed as both: the emptiness of all things, and, as such, as their essence; yet, not as “being” any of the phenomena, but rather their spontaneous arising and cessation of *its* creativity. With Ibn ‘Arabi, Uncompounded Reality, *al-ḥaqq*, is non-dual “Supreme ... Consciousness,” disclosing “itself in the three realms of cosmos, self, and scripture,” as Chittick remarks.¹⁴¹

The third argument: As with the Luminous Mind, Bahá’u’lláh differentiates between *two modes* of the non-dual, indistinct Uncompounded Reality: as *tawḥíd-i-wujúd* or oneness of being, *only* the Uncompounded Reality really exists;¹⁴² and as *tawḥíd i-*

shuhúd or oneness of appearance, the same Uncompounded Reality is indistinctly present in all beings.¹⁴³ Overcoming the traditional opposition between monism and dualism, theism and non-theism, Bahá'u'lláh here indicates that both modes of indistinct unity are *equally valid* in naming the non-conceptual nature of Uncompounded Reality, as the Beyond that is all-encompassing *and* as the Presence that is all-pervading all existence.¹⁴⁴

What is peculiar, however, in Bahá'u'lláh's discussion of the fallacies of dualism and monism is that it even *heightens the non-dual character* of the classical opposition by *reversing the meaning* of both sides against their respective antagonistic, that is, dualistic, schematization in the tradition.¹⁴⁵ This is a subtle, but nevertheless important point to acknowledge so as to really be able to recognize the non-dualist intention of Bahá'u'lláh's answer to both sides of the divide: While *waḥdát al-wujúd* did, in the classical discourse (but already in its simplification that does not hold true, for instance, for Ibn 'Arabi), allow to be intended to express a *monistic* unity (the One *is* all things), Bahá'u'lláh's different formulation *tawḥídi-wujúdi*, "wherein all things are negated with a 'no' and only Absolute Reality is affirmed,"¹⁴⁶ indicates the absolute *transcendence* of ultimate Reality. And while *waḥdát ash-shuhúd*, was (in the context of a monistic reading of the formula "the One is all things") meant to uphold the orthodox dualistic *transcendence* of God infinitely beyond all creatures, Bahá'u'lláh's formulation *tawḥídi-shuhúdi*, seemingly identical with the classical one, conversely indicates the absolute *immanence* of the indistinct uncompounded Reality in all creatures "where the signs of the Primal Divine Unity the manifestation of Eternity, and the effulgences of the Singleness can be observed in all things."¹⁴⁷

The fourth argument: Bahá'u'lláh now *unites* both modes of indistinction, which are only *relatively* true in themselves, as *indistinctly* true *in the self-manifestation* of Uncompounded Reality.¹⁴⁸ This move captures the essence of Bahá'u'lláh's new concept of the Manifestation in the Bahá'í understanding.¹⁴⁹ As

with the Luminous Mind, who/which comprises the Absolute and the Relative, unity and multiplicity, *samsara* and *nirvana*, emptiness and spontaneity in the luminosity of the *dharmakaya*, for Bahá'u'lláh the indistinction between apophatic Reality and its Manifestation is expressed in the *relative uncompoundedness* of the Primal Manifestation. Although the “*locus of the Divine Unity, even though outwardly it is given a name and appears to be bound by limitations*,” Bahá'u'lláh states, the Manifestation “*is in His inner reality uncompounded (basit), sanctified from limitations*.” Yet, this “*uncompounded state is*,” at the same time, “*relative and attributive (ida'fi wa nisbi) and not*,” as Bahá'u'lláh adds, “*uncompounded in an absolute sense (min kull al-jihat)*.”¹⁵⁰ The Manifestation is the *non-difference* of its Self from the apophatic Uncompounded Reality, much as we have found in Plotinus and Longchenpa. The Manifestation is the *ultimate non-dual indistinction*.¹⁵¹ This self-manifestation is Samantabhadra, the Self of immortal light, and the *Bahá' Alláh*, not Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí Núrí, but the apophatic luminosity of God's Self [SAQ #31]. It is the *chitta* that “is” beyond itself *it: pabhassara chitta*¹⁵² [SAQ #31].

What is more, this *ultimate oscillation of indistinction* is an important instrument in Buddhism to hinder any new *reiteration* of any fixed labels by which we would again fall into the ignorance of defilement, clouding the luminosity of its detachment.¹⁵³ As the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh have made clear in many passages of their writings: Although the Primal Manifestation can declare itself “God,” it is never identical with God;¹⁵⁴ and although the Manifestation creates, it is not the creator.¹⁵⁵ Or with Plotinus: Only the intellect that understands *itself* indistinct from, but not identical with, the inaccessible essence of Uncompounded Reality, that is, does neither claim identity with Reality nor difference from it, *is* the Manifestation of *it*.¹⁵⁶

And we can take even one more step, which is the ultimate consequence arising from this movement of indistinction beyond identity and difference, a step expressed by Nicolas of

Cusa and Nagarjuna alike,¹⁵⁷ and ultimately presenting to us the mystery of the Luminous Mind as Uncompounded Reality in reciprocal resonance between the deepest intentions of Buddhism and the Bahá'í writings: that the inexpressible Reality is itself even *beyond any distinction and indistinction*,¹⁵⁸ even that of the unmanifest and manifest Reality of itself, which Bahá'u'lláh indicates in his rendering of the ultimate meaning of the Bahá'í understanding of the *unity of God (tawhíd)* [GWB #24].

6: Mutual Learning

In this final section, I want to at least touch on a few implications that such a transreligious dialogue can offer. Transformation, as has been demonstrated by decades of experience with, and reflection on, interreligious dialogue,¹⁵⁹ and as was mentioned in the beginning, must be viewed as a *mutual* endeavor.¹⁶⁰ This necessity of mutual learning is also confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh's deeply relational insight in the difference of the intentions, situations, and limitations of the revelation related to any Manifestation¹⁶¹ [GWB #22]. This mutual "otherness" of revelations is, in its meaning, by no means exhausted through the "inclusion" of earlier revelations in later ones in the process of progressive revelation.¹⁶² Rather, while the novelty of a later revelation will overarch the limitations of the situational aims of an earlier one, the latter one remains *relative* to the former one (or "other" one) by the fact that no revelation exhausts all revelations completely and, hence, as it adds meaning and purpose, also can generously refer to the *unique* meaning and purpose of any other revelation. In other words, instead of supersession and superiority,¹⁶³ *organic relatedness* may be a better model to understand the unity of revelatory development, not by depriving any revelation of its unique impulses while viewing the emergence of new ones such that all others through its novelty appear in a new light.¹⁶⁴

So, what can Bahá'ís learn from Dzogchen's non-dualism? Let me recall one of the initial questions arising from the puzzle of the Luminous Mind: If *chitta* is, in its nature, already luminous, how does Dzogchen understand the *process* of liberation from defilements? As our mind *is* (indistinct from) the Luminous Mind, there is *no way towards* it, no *path* of salvation, no *process* of liberation that could reach it. Dzogchen draws the radical consequence that, as we *are* already *it*, we have (almost in Daoist manner) *nothing left to do* to achieve it (*wu wei*),¹⁶⁵ not even to meditate – arguably the most essential Buddhist act “on the way toward” liberation imaginable.¹⁶⁶ Hence, Longchenpa's radical Dzogchen was opposed to any *gradualism*, expressed in so many ways in Buddhist orders of meditation or states and levels of advancement. Dzogchen, to the contrary, needs nothing of it. All that is necessary is to *realize* the moment of *rigpa*, nothing more. As Bahá'ís are often advised to exert all possible *effort* on the strait path [GWB #125] – holding the laws, developing their character, their organization, the order that will come to fruition in the spiritual realization of the Most Great Peace, and climbing the ladder of mystical stations – it seems almost paradoxical to find Dzogchen to undermine all Buddhist “efforts.” This is the reason that Dzogchen has been deeply hidden in gradualist teachings throughout Tibetan schools – its adherents, at times, being persecuted. But it is also the reason that Dzogchen today increasingly sees itself as independent of its Buddhist context, actually any religion, becoming universally accessible.¹⁶⁷ This is, I think, something to ponder for a religion like the Bahá'í Faith that claims the same universality: Can the unity of religions be reached from different paths?¹⁶⁸ And how, given their mutual claim of universality, would they relate to one another? It is interesting that Bahá'u'lláh makes similar statements that avoid gradualism, that is, avoids the implication of superiority and supersession. In the *Seven Valleys* Bahá'u'lláh refers to the wayfarer, who is potentially everyone in every religion, to be able to, indeed, escape all gradualism and traverse all stations at

once, “*in seven breaths, nay rather in a single breath*”¹⁶⁹ [SVFV 65].

Conversely, what could Buddhists learn from the Bahá'í writings? Let me back up for a moment and mention a surprising connection of Dzogchen with Abrahamic renderings of God as creator. Buddhism in general, although not universally, negates the meaningfulness of calling this Reality God.¹⁷⁰ It rests its argumentation precisely on the refutation of the concept of the creator. Instead, ultimate Reality is not a creator; rather is the All infinite and without cause, but it is also ultimately illusionary (*samsara*).¹⁷¹ Dzogchen, however, represents an interesting, maybe only apparent, turn to, first, an *affirmation* of phenomenal reality as momentous expression of the creative nature of ultimate Reality. This means that, although the world might still be viewed in terms of illusion, its phenomenal reality is, in its essence, *indistinct* from the creativity of the Luminous Mind.¹⁷² While the *Supreme Source Tantra* and Longchenpa name Samantabhadra as *creator*, they mean the spontaneity of emptiness.¹⁷³ But Diidjom Lingpa, a contemporary of Bahá'u'lláh, confirms in his *Vajra Heart Tantra* that the infinite creativity of the Luminous Mind, again represented by Samantabhadra, *actively creates* all mental and physical elements from its primordial modes of wisdom, although mysteriously through ignorance and defilement.¹⁷⁴ This resonates with the Bahá'í view on creation, which can, in one perspective, be understood as illusion and mirage [GWB #153; SAQ #79], but is in its root nature nothing but the *creative emanation* of Uncompounded Reality [SAQ #53-54]. Being without beginning and end, as in Buddhism, in its origin, however, phenomenal reality arises not by ignorance, but by effortless *love* and *beauty*, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in his *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition* “*I was a Hidden Treasure.*”¹⁷⁵ And since the Primal Manifestation is the creative origin of the material universe¹⁷⁶ [SAQ #82], it is so by being indistinct from Uncompounded Reality *and* by being indistinct

from *this* creative process and its motives: love and beauty. Listen to Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Manifestation:

*Know thou that, verily, the "Manifestation" is not composed of... elements, nay, rather. He is the Mystery of Oneness, of... the Eternal Essence and the Unknowable Reality... which has never been nor shall ever be separate from all else....*¹⁷⁷

Finally, we can look back and ask whether that which Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the foundation of religion, namely, their *unity*, can be expressed with the *mutual immanence* of both Bahá'í and Buddhist *non-dualism*. Two final Bahá'í quotations will corroborate this luminous oscillation. Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys* indicate the emptiness of the world in the *indifference* of ultimate Reality from it, by saying: "*This is the plane whereon the vestiges of all things are destroyed in the traveller, and on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness and the meaning of 'All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord...' is made manifest*" [SV 36-37, quoting Qur'an 55:26-27]. And the first of the *Arabic Hidden Words* may indicate the Luminous Mind as our immanent reality: as the pure and undefiled "being" of our own nature, which we must nevertheless discover and fulfill: "*O SON OF SPIRIT! My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.*" [HW Ar. #1]

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- ¹⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, 62)
- ¹⁹ Non-Dualism has played a central role in my own work in process thought, postmodern thought and interreligious discourse over the last two decades, and has found expression in concepts like in/difference, mutual immanence, transpantheism, polyphilia and theopoetics. See, for instance: Roland Faber, *The Divine Manifold*. Lanham: MD, Lexington Books, 2014; Roland Faber and Catherine Keller, "Polyphilic Pluralism: Becoming Religious Multiplicities," in Chris Boesel and Wesley Ariarajah (eds.), *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, 58-81; Roland Faber, "The Mystical Whitehead," in Marc Pugliese and Gloria Schaab (eds.), *Seeking Common Ground: Evaluation and Critique of Joseph Bracken's Comprehensive Worldview*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2012, 213-34; Roland Faber, "Bodies of the Void: Polyphilia and Theoplicity," in Christian Boesel and Catherine. Keller, eds, *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationship*. New York: Fordham, 2010, 200-226; Roland Faber, *God as Poet of the World*:

Exploring Process Theologies. Louisville: WJK, 2008; Roland Faber, “Der transreligiöse Diskurs: Zu einer Theologie transformativer Prozesse,” in *Polylog* 9 (2002): 65–94; Roland Faber, *Prozestheologie. Zu ihrer Würdigung und kritischen Erneuerung*. Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2000; And there is a stunning resonance between them and both Buddhist metaphysics and the Shaykhi background of Bahá’í thought, yet to be engaged with properly. But this connection will, at best, remain only in the background of the following thought experiment. See: Idris Samawi Hamid, *The Metaphysics and Cosmology of Process According to Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i: Critical Edition, Translation and Analysis of Observations in Wisdom*. Ann Arbor, MI: university of Michigan, 1998.

²⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablet to Jamal-i-Burujirdi (Lawḥ-i-Jamál-i-Burujirdí)*. transl. Khazeh Fananapazir, in *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin*, 5:1-2 (1991) 4-8, hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/journals/bsb.

²¹ In the discussion of monism and dualism, theism and non-theism, at least their relativity it is affirmed by some Bahá’í scholars (Momen) as being essential to Bahá’í scriptures, it is accepted in a qualified, but hierarchically limited form by others (Saiedi), and rejected by yet others (Kluge). Many of the related problems could be avoided if they would be understood on the basis of the third alternative, however, non-dual thought. See: Moojan Momen, “Relativism: A Basis For Bahá’í Metaphysics,” in Moojan Momen (ed.), *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988, 185-218; Moojan Momen, “Relativism: A Theological and Cognitive Basis For Bahá’í Ideas,” in *Lights of Irfan* 12 (2010): 367-97; Ian Kluge, “Relativism and the Bahá’í Writings,” in *Lights of Irfan* 9 (2008): 179-238; Ian Kluge, “Relativism and the Bahá’í Writings,” in *Lights of Irfan* 9 (2008): 179-238; Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010, Introduction.

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²⁴ Michael Sours, *The Station and Claims of Bahá’u’lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1997, ch. 2.

²⁵ Moojan Momen, “A Bahá’í Approach to Other Religions: The Example of Buddhism,” in Moojan Momen (ed.), *The Bahá’í Faith and the World’s Religions*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 167-188.

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- ⁴² Ian Kluge, "Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings: An Ontological Rapprochement," in *Lights of Irfan* 8 (2007): 125-78.
- ⁴³ Moojan Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1995.
- ⁴⁴ Juan R. Cole, "A Zen Gloss on Bahá'u'lláh Commentary on 'He who knoweth his self knoweth his Lord'" @ www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/bhzen1.htm.

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- ⁴⁵ Seena Fazel, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith," in *Interreligious Insight* 1:3 (2003): 42-49.
- ⁴⁶ Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
- ⁴⁷ Moojan Momen, "The God of Bahá'u'lláh," in Moojan Momen (ed.), *The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003.
- ⁴⁸ Seena Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations," Jack McLean (ed.), *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 137-152
- ⁴⁹ "The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh...is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society...." [PDC 1]
- ⁵⁰ Julio Savi, "Religious Pluralism: A Bahá'í Perspective," in *World Order*, 31.2 (2000): 25-41.
- ⁵¹ Raimondo Panikkar, *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989, chs. 1-3.
- ⁵² J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era: An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2006, ch. 8.
- ⁵³ "Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coördinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations." [WOB 114]
- ⁵⁴ Helen Bassett Hornby, *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. New Deli: Bahá'í Publishing, 2010, #1704.
- ⁵⁵ Roland Faber, "Gottesmeer – Versuch über die Ununterschiedenheit Gottes," in Thomas Dienberg and Michael Plattig (eds.), "*Leben in Fülle*": *Skizzen zur christlichen Spiritualität*. Münster: LIT, 2001, 64-95.
- ⁵⁶ Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*. London: Routledge, 1995, 157-160.
- ⁵⁷ *Pabhassara Sutta: Luminous*. Transl. from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu @ www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an01/an01.049.than.html.

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- ⁵⁸ Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism: Basic terminology and Concepts of Buddhist Philosophy and Practice*. Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 1996, chs. 3-4.
- ⁵⁹ Mizuno, *Essentials*, ch. 8.
- ⁶⁰ Williams, *Thought*, chs. 4-7.
- ⁶¹ Harvey, *Mind*, ch. 10; Khenpo Sodargye, *Heaven of Peace: Finding our True Home in the Mind and Heart*. Bodhi Institute of Compassion and Wisdom, 2013, 80-1.
- ⁶² See Keith Dowman, "Introduction," in *Spaciousness: The Radical Dzogchen of the Vajra-Heart. Longchenpa's Precious Treasury of the Dharmadhatu* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Publications, 2013), xiii-xxix.
- ⁶³ Tulku Pema Rigtsal, *The Great Secret of Mind: Special Introductions on the Nonduality of Dzogchen*. Boston: Snow Lions Publications, 2012, ch. 1.
- ⁶⁴ John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1995, 140-141.
- ⁶⁵ Nancy McCagney, *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Oneness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997, ch. 3.
- ⁶⁶ Williams, *Thought*, ch. 5; Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche, *Luminous Mind: The Way of the Buddha*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1993, 146-7.
- ⁶⁷ Harvey, *Mind*, 169-175.
- ⁶⁸ Kalu Rinpoche, *Mind*, 15-26.
- ⁶⁹ Whalen Lai, "Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey," in Antonio S. Cua (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 8-19.
- ⁷⁰ Yousef Daoud, *The Rose and the Lotus: Sufism and Buddhism*. Xlibris Cooperation, 2009, 55.
- ⁷¹ Izutsu, *Sufism*, ch. 2.
- ⁷² Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, *The Supreme Source: The Fundamental Tantra of the Szogchen Semde Kunjed Gyalpo*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lions Publications, 1999, 55.
- ⁷³ Norbu, *Source*, 56.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 20.
- ⁷⁶ Dowman, *Spaciousness*, 5-6.
- ⁷⁷ Rigtsal, *Secret*, 48.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 57-8.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, xxvii-iii.
- ⁸¹ Dowman, *Spaciousness*, xvi.

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- ⁸² Faber *God*, §41.
- ⁸³ Stephen Lambden "The Word Bahá: Quintessence of the Greatest Name," in *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 3:1 (1993): 19-42; see also the revised version: *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 8:2 (1997-1998): 13-45.
- ⁸⁴ Bruce Watson, *Light: A Radiant History from Creation to the Quantum Age*. New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, ch. 3.
- ⁸⁵ John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001, ch. 3.
- ⁸⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the doctrine of the Incarnation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996, ch. 7.
- ⁸⁷ Lambden, Word, 19-42; D. T. Suzuki, "Shin Buddhism," in Alfred Bloom (ed.), *Living in Amida's Universal Vow: Essays in Shin Buddhism*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004, ch. 4.
- ⁸⁸ Norbu, *Source*, 21.
- ⁸⁹ See also Savi, *Summit*, 273-277.
- ⁹⁰ Momen, *God*, 23-26.
- ⁹¹ Saiedi, *Gate*, 201-204. We can find a similar view in the West virtually only in the philosophy of Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. ed. by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978, 21-2.
- ⁹² Keven Brown, "Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to Darwinism: Its Historical and Philosophical Context," in Keven Brown (ed.), *Evolution and Bahá'í Belief: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to Nineteenth-Century Darwinism*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2001, 68-74. Again, this move is unparalleled, except for Alfred North Whitehead, see: Faber, *Poet*, § 32.
- ⁹³ Guang Xing, *The Concept of the Buddha: Its evolution from early Buddhism to the trik ya theory*. New York: Routledge, 2010, ch. 4.
- ⁹⁴ Mizuno, *Essentials*, ch. 4.
- ⁹⁵ "To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress" [GWB #93]. "It should be remembered in this connection that the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness. His reality transcendeth such limitations. His relationship to His creatures knoweth no degrees. That some are near and others are far is to be ascribed to the manifestations themselves." [GWB 19]
- ⁹⁶ Brian Edward Brown, *The Buddha Nature: A Study of the Tathāgatagarbha and Ālayavijñāna*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004, 5.
- ⁹⁷ Strong, *Experience*, 143-151; "Exalted, immeasurably exalted art Thou, O my Beloved, above the strivings of any of Thy creatures, however learned,

to know Thee; exalted, immensely exalted art Thou above every human attempt, no matter how searching, to describe Thee! For the highest thought of men, however deep their contemplation, can never hope to outsoar the limitations imposed upon Thy creation, nor ascend beyond the state of the contingent world, nor break the bounds irrevocably set for it by Thee.” [PM #184]

- ⁹⁸ I have called this the necessary contrast between *apophysis* and *polyphilia*: Faber, *God*, Postscript; *Manifold*, chs. 8, 15, and passim; Roland Faber, ““Ecotheology, Ecoprocess, and *Ecotheosis*: A Theopoetical Intervention,” in *Salzburger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 12 (2008): 75-115.
- ⁹⁹ Daoud, *Rose*, 63.
- ¹⁰⁰ McCagney, *Nagarjuna*, 95.
- ¹⁰¹ Sells, *Languages*, ch. 1.
- ¹⁰² Bahá'u'lláh, *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition* “He who knoweth his self hath known his Lord (Man ‘arafa nafsahú faqad ‘arafa Rabbahú). transl. Shoghi Effendi and Juan Cole, 1996 @ bahai-library.com/bahauallah_knoweth_himself_cole.
- ¹⁰³ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 120.
- ¹⁰⁴ Momen, *God*, 20.
- ¹⁰⁵ The term “Primal Manifestation” is related to, and identical in its meaning with, terms such as “Primal Will” or “Primal Point,” often used in the Bahá’í Writings to indicate the divine nature of the Manifestations, and their essential unity in the Mind, Will, or Word of God, indicating the manifest God, not the unmanifest Godhead; see: Momen, *God*, 23-24. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh uses this term, for instance, in this passage of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, indicating that “by ‘divine Presence’ is meant the ‘Secondary Revelation of God,’ interpreted as the ‘Holy Outpouring,’ [which] is admittedly applicable to the world of creation, that is, in the realm of the primal and original manifestation of God. Such revelation is confined to His Prophets and chosen Ones, inasmuch as none mightier than they hath come to exist in the world of being. This truth all recognize, and bear witness thereto. These Prophets and chosen Ones of God are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God. They are the mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God. Whatsoever is applicable to them is in reality applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible”; Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1974, 141.
- ¹⁰⁶ See also: Bahá'u'lláh, *Commentary on a Verse of Rumi*. transl. by Juan R. Cole. @ whoisbahauallah.com/windflower/translations-on-this-site/translations/127-commentary-on-a-verse-of-rumi.

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- ¹⁰⁷ See also Bahá'u'lláh on the Báb: *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i Aqdas* pp. 42-3; on himself and all Manifestation: *Gleanings*, #22.
- ¹⁰⁸ Izutsu, *Sufism*, ch. 7; Corbin, *Alone*, 114-115.
- ¹⁰⁹ Juan R. Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," in *Bahá'í Studies* 9 (1982) @ bahai-library.com/cole_concept_manifestation, Chart II.
- ¹¹⁰ Savi, *Summit*, 255-260; Dowman, *Spaciousness*, 43.
- ¹¹¹ Corbin, *Alone*, 120.
- ¹¹² Coming from the Primal Will, all Manifestations have their "essence" in the station of pure abstraction and essential unity "indistinct, that is without substantial differentiation (and based on substantialist philosophical categories), from one another.
- ¹¹³ Sells, *Languages*, 75-77; Corbin, *Alone*, 105-112.
- ¹¹⁴ Saiedi, *Gate*, 164, following the Hadith of Imam Sadiq, to which the Báb often refers in characterization of the non-duality of the Primal Point (Will, Mind), namely, that "servitude is a substance the essence of which is divinity."
- ¹¹⁵ Dowman, *Spaciousness*, Canto IV; Massao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives (eds.), *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, 3-68.
- ¹¹⁶ Sells, Ibn 'Arabi, 991.
- ¹¹⁷ Momen, *God*, 20.
- ¹¹⁸ Sours, *Syllable*, chs. 1-2.
- ¹¹⁹ John S. Hatcher, "The Validity and Value of an Historical-Critical Approach to the Revealed Works of Bahá'u'lláh," in Moojan Momen (ed.), *Scripture and Revelation: Papers presented at the First Irfan Colloquium*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1997, 27-52.
- ¹²⁰ Williams, *Thought*, 170; Faber, *Manifold*, ch. 4.
- ¹²¹ Vahid Brown, "The Beginning that Hath No Beginning: Bahá'í Cosmogony," in *Lights of Irfan* 3 (2002): 21-40.
- ¹²² Ian Kluge, "Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," in *Lights of Irfan* 4 (2003): 17-78; "The Bahá'í Writings and the Buddhist Doctrine of Emptiness: An Initial Survey," @ bahai-library.com/kluge_buddhist_doctrine_emptiness.
- ¹²³ R. Corless, "Can Buddhism Validate the Truth of God Incarnate?" in *Modern Theology* 3:4 (1987), 336-7.
- ¹²⁴ This is a truth of virtually all Western and Eastern religious traditions if we are inclined to see it as consequential and not as an item of a dogmatic system that, despite this profound ultimacy of the apophatic nature of Reality, goes on to, in its further discussions of God or ultimate Reality

in relation to the world, as if this insight has no real implications. See also Lambden, *Background*, passim.

- ¹²⁵ Dowman, *Spaciousness*, Canto XIII; Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-Yen Buddhism: A Critical Study of Cumulative Penetration vs. Interpenetration*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1982, part I.
- ¹²⁶ Savi, *Summit*, ch. 12.
- ¹²⁷ Roland Faber, "Bodies of the Void: Polyphilia and Theoplicity," in Christian Boesel and Catherine. Keller (eds.), *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationship*. New York: Fordham, 2010, 200-226.
- ¹²⁸ Kluge, *Buddhism*, 155; see however: Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2005, ch. 1; Roland Faber, "Multiplicity and Mysticism: Toward a New Mystagogy of Becoming," in Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nozek (eds.), *The Lure of Whitehead*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 187-206; Roland Faber, "Becoming Intermezzo: Eco-Theopoetics after the Anthropic Principle," in Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal (eds.), *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, 212-238.
- ¹²⁹ Teasdale, *Heart*, ch. 3; F. Samuel Brainard, *Reality and Mystical Experience*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2000, ch. 8.
- ¹³⁰ Louis Roy, *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003, ch. 3.
- ¹³¹ Momen, *God*, 20.
- ¹³² Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality* (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa). intro. and trans. Moojan Momen: "Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa)," in: *Lights of Irfan* 11 (2010): 213-21.
- ¹³³ Izutsu, *Sufism*, ch. 2.
- ¹³⁴ See also the fascinating tablet of Bahá'u'lláh on al-ḥaqq: Bahá'u'lláh, *The Lawḥ-i ḥaqq* (The Tablet of the Ultimately Real). transl. Stephen Lambden @ hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/379; Stephen Lambden, Introduction to The Lawḥ-i ḥaqq/Lawḥ al-Ḥaqq (Tablet of Truth/True One/Ultimately Real) @ hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/378.
- ¹³⁵ Moojan Momen, "Introduction to Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa)," in: *Lights of Irfan* 11 (2010): 203-212.
- ¹³⁶ Momen, *Introduction*, 204-205.
- ¹³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa*, 213; Sells, *Apophysis*, 60.
- ¹³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa*, 213.

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- ¹³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa, 213-214.
- ¹⁴⁰ Cole, Concept, Chart II.
- ¹⁴¹ Chittick, Ibn 'Arabi, 920.
- ¹⁴² Ibn 'Arabi writes in his al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya I:272 "The is naught in existence (al-wujúd) save God and none knoweth God except God..." (Reference by Stephen Lambden).
- ¹⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa, 214-215.
- ¹⁴⁴ Momen, God, 9-11; Relativism, 7-14. Because of the non-substantialist and non-dualist understanding I affirm here, the arguments against Momen by Kluge (see note 23), which are still based on substantialism and dualism, are not applying. For my own development of non-dualism as basis for this transreligious conversation, see: Faber, God, §40.
- ¹⁴⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa, 214-215.
- ¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 214.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 214.
- ¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 215.
- ¹⁴⁹ Roland Faber, *The Garden of Reality: Transreligious Relativity in a World of Becoming* (forthcoming), ch. 7.
- ¹⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqqíqa, 215.
- ¹⁵¹ Momen, God, 25; Faber, *God*, §40; Garden, ch. 7.
- ¹⁵² Sells, *Languages*, ch. 1.
- ¹⁵³ Kalu Rinpoche, *Mind*, 146-147. Bahá'u'lláh, KA, m54: "...on the wings of detachment, soar beyond all created things."
- ¹⁵⁴ Momen, God, 25.
- ¹⁵⁵ Saiedi, *Gate*, 190-192; Vahid Brown, "The Beginning that Hath No Beginning: Bahá'í Cosmogony," in *Lights of Irfan* 3 (2002): 21-40.
- ¹⁵⁶ Sells, *Languages*, ch. 1.
- ¹⁵⁷ Faber, *Garden*, ch. 7; Gottesmeier, *passim*; Roger J. Corless, "Speaking of the Unspeakable: Negation as the Way in Nicholas of Cusa and Nāgārjuna," in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2 (1982): 107-117.
- ¹⁵⁸ Faber, *Manifold*, ch. 13; *God*, §40; Roland Faber, *Prozeßtheologie. Zu ihrer Würdigung und kritischen Erneuerung*. Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2000, §31.
- ¹⁵⁹ Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, chs. 1-2.
- ¹⁶⁰ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999, chs. 4-5; Fazel, *Dialogue*, 2-3.
- ¹⁶¹ Sours, *Station*, chs. 4-6.

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- ¹⁶² Here, we approach the difference between religious inclusivism (by which one can ultimately only be saved to the truth of one religion) and religious pluralism (by which this truth is found in all religions): David Griffin (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2005, chs. 1-2; Fazel, *Pluralism*, passim; Roland Faber and Catherine Keller, "A Taste for Multiplicity: The Skillful Means of Religious Pluralism," in John Cobb (ed.), *Religions in the Making: Whitehead and the Wisdom Traditions of the World*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012, 180-207.
- ¹⁶³ Jorge N. Ferrer, "The Future of World Religion: Four Scenarios, One Dream," in *Tikkun* (Winter 2012): 14-6, 63-4; Seena Fazel, "Bahá'í Approaches to Christianity and Islam: Further Thoughts on Developing an Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *Bahá'í Studies Review* 14 (2008): 41-53.
- ¹⁶⁴ Faber, *God*, §36; Roland Faber, "On the Unique Origin of Revelation, Religious Intuition and Theology," in *Process Studies* 28:3-4 (1999): 273-289; Roland Faber, "The Sense of Peace: A Para-doxology of Divine Multiplicity," in C. Keller and L. Schneider (eds.), *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*. London: Routledge, 2011, 36-56.
- ¹⁶⁵ J. J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformation of Taoist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 84-6.
- ¹⁶⁶ Rigtsal, *Secret*, ch. 2.
- ¹⁶⁷ Dowman, *Spaciousness*, Introduction.
- ¹⁶⁸ GWB #128; John Hatcher, *From Sin to Salvation: The Ascent of the Soul*. Wilmette: IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 273. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, 71: "Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself. Verily, such a man is reckoned, by virtue of the Will of God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, with the people of Bahá who dwell in the Crimson Ark."
- ¹⁶⁹ Similar statements may be found for instance: "O SON OF LOVE! Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity...." [HW Persian #7]; or "He should forgive the sinful, and never despise his low estate, for none knoweth what his own end shall be. How often hath a sinner attained, at the hour of death, to the essence of faith, and, quaffing the immortal draught, hath taken his flight unto the Concourse on high! And how often hath a devout believer, at the hour of his soul's ascension, been so changed as to fall into the nethermost fire!" [GWB 265].
- ¹⁷⁰ Dharmasiri, *Critique*, ch. 2.
- ¹⁷¹ Kalu Rinpoche, *Mind*, 67-172.
- ¹⁷² Dowman, *Spaciousness*, Canto VII.
- ¹⁷³ Nurbu, *Source*, 135-203.
- ¹⁷⁴ *The Vajra Heart Tantra: A Tantra Naturally Arisen from the Nature of Existence from the Matrix of Primordial Awareness of Pure Perception*

(Tib. *Dag snang ye shes drva pa las gnas lugs rang byung gi rgyud rdo rje'i snying po*). Collected Works of H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, in Alan Wallace, "Is Buddhism Really Nontheistic," AAR 1999, www.alanwallace.org/Is%20Buddhism%20Really%20Nontheistic_.pdf).

¹⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'*, transl. by Moojan Momen, in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, 3:4 (1995): 4-35

¹⁷⁶ Saiedi, *Gate*, 97-8.

¹⁷⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet of Manifestation*, bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_zuhur, §2; see also Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet of Manifestation*, trans. Stephen Lambden, @ hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/450.

Themes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Tablets of The Divine Plan* Illustrated by Scriptural References to the Bible and the Qur’án

Lameh Fananapazir

Abstract

The Tablets of the Divine Plan of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (March 1916–March 1917), His Will and Testament, and the *Lawḥ-i-Karmil* (Tablet of Carmel) revealed by Bahá’u’lláh are described by Shoghi Effendi as the three “Charters” for promotion of the Cause of God [MBW 84–85]. Those revealed by the Center of the Covenant share several closely related subjects which will be examined here, specifically in the context of their references to the Bible and to the Qur’án. Problems facing humanity arising from a crisis of Faith — a spiritual affliction caused by humanity being denied Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation — a situation addressed in the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

Introduction

‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed fourteen succinct and seminal letters over a period of one year during the latter part of World War I. Addressed to North America about five years prior to His

ascension, they constitute one of three “Charters” of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.

All the teaching plans launched by the beloved Guardian, as well as those subsequently directed by the Universal House of Justice, are stages in the implementation of this master plan conceived by the Centre of the Covenant for the diffusion of the Message of Bahá’u’lláh.¹ [MBW 84-85]

The “Tablets of the Divine Plan” mandate members of the North American community to undergo a spiritual baptism and arise to proclaim the advent of the Kingdom of God, relying on the support of the Holy Spirit and confident that their efforts will bear fruit in a fertile field and that the Divine Word will transform souls and create unity and harmony. The letters are replete with direct and indirect references to the Bible and the Qur’án, demonstrating that the Source of inspiration of all Dispensations is One, and that Bahá’u’lláh is the Promise and fulfillment of the Glad-tidings of the Bible and of the Qur’án. The Tablets remind us that Christianity triumphed through the exemplary sacrificial efforts of the disciples to propagate far and wide the ‘Good News’ of the coming of the Kingdom. Five years later, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament, challenged us even more directly to follow their example:

It behooveth them not to rest for a moment, neither to seek repose. They must disperse themselves in every land, pass by every clime, and travel throughout all regions. Bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end, they must raise in every land the triumphal cry “Ya Bahá’u’l-Abhá!” (O Thou the Glory of Glories)... The disciples of Christ forgot themselves and all earthly things, forsook all their cares and belongings, purged themselves of self and passion, and with absolute detachment scattered far and wide and engaged in calling the peoples of the world to the divine guidance;

till at last they made the world another world, illumined the surface of the earth, and even to their last hour proved self-sacrificing in the pathway of that beloved One of God. Finally in various lands they suffered glorious martyrdom. Let them that are men of action follow in their footsteps! [WT 10-11]

The purpose of this presentation is to examine themes of the Tablets of the Divine Plan in the context of overt and oblique references to the Gospels and the Qur'án, and allusions to the early followers of Christ. These include (a) the importance of attaining 'the Straight Path' and investigating the truth; (b) a declaration of the Oneness of Divine Purpose and the Oneness of Faith; (c) the role of the North America community in establishing 'the oneness of humanity'; (d) the necessity to undergo a spiritual rebirth and the requisite spiritual qualities of those whose privilege is to promote the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh; (e) the duty of every Bahá'í in North America to travel teach, and as bidden by the "Divine Gardener" to plant the "seed"; (f) the creative power of the Holy Spirit and the ability of the Divine Word to transform darkness into light and to revive seemingly spiritually lifeless souls; (g) the influence or power of one (individual) or a few; (h) the exhortation to follow the sacrificial example of the disciples who through their death and suffering testified to their faith in their Lord and belief in the promise of the coming of the kingdom of God; (i) the importance of unity of the friends through faithfulness to the covenant as they resolutely and single-mindedly endeavor to rid humanity of its divisions and rancor and to replace the hatred with love and amity; and (j) the critical need for Bahá'ís to be able to explain the truths of the Bible and of the Qur'án if they are to understand adequately their own Faith, as an essential preliminary to teaching it, and, importantly, if they are to usher in the unity of mankind and reconciliation of the religions.

Humanity is beset by several seemingly intractable issues. These include irrational nationalism and territorial and

ideological conflicts, excessive expenditure of global resources on armaments, corruption, a widening gap between the rich and the poor, global warming, population growth coupled with finite resources, energy demand-supply uncertainties, instability of global economics and reservations concerning sustainable development, continuing health worries, lack of clean water supply, transnational organized crime, inharmonious relation of science and faith, racial, religious and sectarian prejudice, disintegration of the fabric of society due to ethical and moral decay, and lack of universal education. Additionally, the world has recently witnessed a series of appalling atrocities due to a resurgence of militant religious fanaticism.

As noted by Shoghi Effendi, humanity regrettably is often prompted to take definitive measures and redeem itself only after disastrous events:

Much suffering will still be required ere the contending nations, creeds, classes and races of mankind are fused in the crucible of universal affliction, and are forged by the fires of a fierce ordeal into one organic commonwealth, one vast, unified, and harmoniously functioning system. Adversities unimaginably appalling, undreamed of crises and upheavals, war, famine, and pestilence, might well combine to engrave in the soul of an unheeding generation those truths and principles which it has disdained to recognize and follow. A paralysis more painful than any it has yet experienced must creep over and further afflict the fabric of a broken society ere it can be rebuilt and regenerated.
[WOB 193-194]

The followers of Bahá'u'lláh, however, cannot let the happenings of the world and adversity sadden them. Their duty is to arise and rescue society from the evident evils under which it groans, and to carry out the wishes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as expressed in His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Shoghi Effendi explains:

Who knows but that these few remaining, fast-fleeting years, may not be pregnant with events of unimaginable magnitude, with ordeals more severe than any that humanity has as yet experienced, with conflicts more devastating than any which have preceded them. Dangers, however sinister, must, at no time, dim the radiance of their new-born faith. Strife and confusion, however bewildering, must never befog their vision. Tribulations, however afflictive, must never shatter their resolve. Denunciations, however clamorous, must never sap their loyalty. Upheavals, however cataclysmic, must never deflect their course. The present Plan, embodying the budding hopes of a departed Master, must be pursued, relentlessly pursued, whatever may befall them in the future, however distracting the crises that may agitate their country or the world. [ADJ 72]

History records that true religion has at various times been a vital force for the betterment of mankind. Man has a spiritual yearning and needs to be put in touch once again with his spiritual nature. Bahá'u'lláh remarks “*every body calleth aloud for a soul*”, and adds, “*heavenly souls must needs quicken, with the breath of the Word of God, the dead bodies with a fresh spirit*” [ADJ 82-83]. At their core, many of the problems that humanity faces are due to deficient ethics and morality. Faced with a similar situation at the beginning of Islám, the Qur'án attributed the evil to a spiritual malaise requiring divinely ordained solutions:

In their hearts is a (spiritual) disease; and God has increased their disease: and grievous (painful) is the penalty they (incur, will face), because of their denial (of divine Message).²

The Bahá'í Faith provides the necessary spiritual remedies:

The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever

restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?

The world is in travail and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. [GWB 200]

And again:

Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction. [GWB 288]

The Tablets of Divine Plan may be regarded as the instrument that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá devised during the dark days of World War I for the purpose of proclaiming the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh to the remotest corners of the earth. The Divine Plan is laid out in fourteen letters, four addressed to the Bahá’í community of North America and ten addressed to communities in specific geographic areas. In the letters He summons the American and Canadian believers to arise and establish the Cause of God throughout the planet.

The Tablets of the Divine Plan contain several direct and indirect quotations from the Gospels and the Qur’án, the study of which increases significantly our understanding of our mission.

Theme one: “Guide us to the straight path” (*Ihdiná aṣ-ṣiráṭu’l-mustaqím*)

This invocation appears is the sixth verse (*áyah*) of the first chapter (*súrah*) of the Qur’án, *Al-Fátihah*, or ‘The Opening’ which has a total of seven verses. The *súrah* was revealed by

Muḥammad initially in Mecca and subsequently re-revealed in Medina³.

The significance of this verse is underscored by the fact that it is quoted twice, in both the second and ninth Tablets of the Divine Plan, and several more times in the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It encapsulates several related themes that are essential to our teaching efforts and to our ability to explain the relation of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh to Islám and to earlier dispensations.

Expectation

Attaining 'the Straight Path' or 'the Way' of God (the *Ṣirát*⁴), is part of a prayer that Muslims are required to repeat five daily. Muslims are thereby reminded not only to pursue God's good pleasure in their lifetime, but also to anticipate the Path of God and His Guidance. They are to avoid "*the (path) of those who earn (God's) anger nor of those who go astray crooked ways.*"¹¹ If Muslims follow the admonition to follow the Straight Path *fástaqímú*, i.e. "be straightforward" they shall be rewarded with the glad-tiding of entering the paradise of Divine good pleasure:

*And for those who say, "Our Lord is God," and then follow the Straight Path without deviation, the angels descend upon them from time to time (with the Message): "Do not fear or grieve, but rejoice in Paradise which you have been promised."*⁵

Bahá'u'lláh states that the 'Good News' promised by earlier Dispensations is fulfilled today:

Glory be to God Who has revealed the Verses in Truth to the Prophets and Messengers ... In these verses are given Glad Tidings concerning the Straight Path of God, where all things are explained in detail, as a guide and a reminder for those who enter the Divine Paradise by the

*leave of God. Verily they will be guided to Salvation and will be led to the Holy Shores, nigh unto God, the Help in Peril, the Mighty, the Self-Subsisting.*⁶

Attaining the Straight Path requires receptivity and a desire for spiritual enlightenment:

*Those who deny our verses (signs) are deaf and dumb, in darkness. Whomsoever God will, He leads astray, and whomsoever He will, He places him upon a Straight Path.*⁷

The Qur'án therefore envisions that when God re-reveals His Straight Path Muslims will plead that God does not allow them to be shamed, e.g. by inability to recognize the event after all of the Divine exhortations.⁸

Expectation of the Straight Path (Way) in Judeo-Christianity

The Jews similarly pray for, and anticipate, as promised in the Tanakh by their Prophets, Isaiah and Micah, future Divine Paths and guidance:

Let us go to the Mount of the Lord... that He may instruct us in His ways,

And that we may walk in His paths... [Isaiah 2:3]

For the days to come,

The Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains;

And it shall tower above the hills.

The peoples shall gaze upon it with joy,

And the many nations shall go and shall say

"Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord...

*That He may instructs us in His ways,
And that we may walk in His paths.”* [Micah 4:1-2]

*Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,
that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is
pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare
ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and
hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made
straight, and the rough places plain:*

*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (The Presence
of the Lord shall appear), and all flesh shall see it
together.* [Isaiah 40:2-5]

Moses prayed that God grants the Children of Israel
recognition of His ways:

*... pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You
and continue in Your favor. Consider, too, that this
nation is Your people.* [Exodus 33:13]

It is also part of a prayer of the Psalms (*Zabur* in the Qur'án):

*Let me know Your paths, O Lord; teach me Your Ways;
Guide me in Your true way and teach me, for You are
God, my deliverer;
it is You I look to at all times.* [Psalms 25:4-5]

In the sermon on the Mount Jesus warned that “*strait is the
gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few
there be that find it*” [Matthew 7:14].

***“God guides whom He will to a Path that is straight”
– there is therefore no need to compel anyone to
accept Islám⁹***

Ultimately, God will define the nature of the Straight Path and will thus determine which Muslim enters it depending on his or her receptivity:

The life of this world is alluring to those who reject faith, and they scoff at those who believe. But the righteous will be above them on the Day of Resurrection; For God bestows His abundance without measure on whom He will.

... God by His Grace guided the believers to the Truth, concerning that wherein they differed. For God guides whom He will to a Path that is straight.¹⁰

In the beginning of the eleventh Tablet addressed to the Bahá'ís of the Central States 'Abdu'l-Bahá eulogizes the station of the follower of Bahá'u'lláh who has been selected by God to recognize His Day and privileged to promote His Cause. He quotes the following verse of the Qur'án:

God will choose for His special Mercy whom He will – for God is Lord of grace abounding.¹¹

An identical statement is also contained in another verse of the Qur'án:

It is never the wish of those without Faith among the People of the Book (religious leaders), nor the polytheists (pagans), that anything good should come down to you from your Lord. But God will choose for His special Mercy whom He will – for God is Lord of grace abounding.¹²

In this context, a prayer revealed in the ninth Tablet of Divine Plan expresses the profound gratitude of the followers

of Bahá'u'lláh for having been directed to God's promised straight path:

O Thou kind Lord! Praise be unto Thee that Thou hast shown us the highway of guidance...

“Guide us to the siráta almustaqeem” comprises several considerations including a reminder to Muslims of their important spiritual responsibility to investigate the Truth

Evidently, the expectations of the ‘straight Ways’ or ‘right Paths’ of God in the Bible and *aṣ-ṣirāṭ mustaqím* in the Qur'án are incompatible with institutionally inspired beliefs of finality of any Dispensation, including that of Islám, for it is evident that the ways represent spiritual journeys and do not constitute *per se* a final destination.

In the Tanakh¹³ the Lord of Hosts declares to the followers of Moses that when they search for Him, they will find Him, “if only you seek me wholeheartedly [Jeremiah 29:13]. In the Gospels, the Heavenly Father will respond to the Christian but he is required to ask, seek and knock [Matthew 7:7-8]. Likewise, Alláh's or God's guidance to His way (*sabil*, pl. *sobuḥ*) is, as stated in the Qur'án and commented on by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-Íqán*, conditional on Muslims making a sincere effort to investigate the truth free of preconceived notions and imitation (*taqlíd*)¹⁴:

*And those who strive in Our (Cause) – We will certainly guide them to Our Paths: for verily God is with those who do right.*¹⁵

*Follow not that which thou hast no knowledge, verily, the hearing, and the sight and the heart, each of these shall be enquired of.*¹⁶

*O ye who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest ye harm people unwittingly, and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done.*¹⁷

*O my Lord! advance me in knowledge.*¹⁸

*... Fear God and God will give you knowledge.*¹⁹

*Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition.*²⁰

The declaration of the Oneness of God is the Straight Path

Clearly, as God is Infinite, the declaration that He is One²¹ is not a description and an understanding of His unknowable reality but a declaration that the Source of Inspiration (*wahy*) of all faiths and all humanity is one.

I beg of Thee, O my God, by Thy power, and Thy might, and Thy sovereignty, which have embraced all who are in Thy heaven and on Thy earth, to make known unto Thy servants this luminous Way and this Straight Path, that they may acknowledge Thy unity and Thy oneness, with a certainty which the vain imaginations of the doubters will not impair, nor the idle fancies of the wayward obscure. [PM #176]

The Torah states that God is One:

*Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord*²²

Christ affirmed this teaching to be the greatest Law of God:

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered

them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. [Mark 12:28-30]

The Qur'án also declares God is one.

*Say: He is God, the One and Only*²³

It proclaims that the assertion that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same Lord constitutes the Straight Path:

*Verily God is my Lord and your Lord: Him therefore serve ye: this is a Way that is straight (háthá siratun mustaqeemun).*²⁴

It is a declaration of the Oneness of the Way of God

Man is on the right Path and not on the crooked way when he realizes that every religious dispensation, *ummah* or *shariat*, share the same spiritual truths, and is an integral part of the same eternal Faith of God. Bahá'u'lláh attests to this unity of the Divine Purpose:

Thus doth the Lord make plain the ways of truth and guidance, ways that lead to one way, which is this Straight Path. Render thanks unto God for this most gracious favour; offer praise unto Him for this bounty that hath encompassed the heavens and the earth; extol Him for this mercy that hath pervaded all creation. [KA 24]

The religions differ only in the potency of the light of their revelation and in their social laws, which are not designed to be

permanent and require to be abrogated and discarded when they no longer serve the best interests of the individual or society.

Hence, bearing witness to the truth of one religion is a testimony of belief in all faiths. Conversely to deny one is to deny all of them. It is in this context that Christ declared to the Jewish leaders of His time who opposed Him that had they truly understood Moses and His Writings they would also have recognized Him.²⁵ Hence, the Qur'án declares that the religion (*dín* or *deen*) revealed to Muḥammad is the exact same as the one revealed to earlier prophets. The warning is added that Muslims must not divide the One Common Faith.

He has established for you the same religion as that which He enjoined on Noah — the same inspiration sent to thee, and the same We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in Religion, and make no divisions therein: this is hard for the mushrikún²⁶. God chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him).²⁷

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in the first sentence of the first Tablet of the Divine Plan addressed to the Bahá’ís of the Northeastern States, refers to the Bahá’u’lláh, the Source and Center of our Faith, as the “*threshold of oneness*.” In the eleventh Tablet of the Divine Plan addressed to the Bahá’ís of the Central States He emphasizes that the flag of unity is to be raised by establishing the Oneness of God and the Oneness of religion. Unfortunately, all paths have become crooked largely due to insistence on false theories of superiority, finality and exclusivity of religion. They require to be cleared of these divisive concepts and straightened. In this manner, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá anticipates, the joy of unity will overflow to the rest of humanity:

... the call to the world of unity, “There is no God but One God, and all the Messengers, from the beginning to

the Seal of the Prophets (Muḥammad) ...” may be raised; the flag of the oneness of the world of humanity be unfurled, the melody of universal peace may reach the ears of the East and the West, all the paths may be cleared and straightened, all the hearts may be attracted to the Kingdom of God, the tabernacle of unity be pitched on the apex of America, the song of the love of God may exhilarate and rejoice all the nations and peoples, the surface of the earth may become the eternal paradise, the dark clouds may be dispelled and the Sun of Truth may shine forth with the utmost intensity. [TDP 79]

In keeping with the principle of oneness of faith the Guardian points out that describing the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh as “a new religion” fails to do justice to its admittedly wider role – the unification of all religions:

Ceasing to designate to itself a movement, a fellowship and the like – designations that did grave injustice to its ever-unfolding system... refusing to be labeled as a mere philosophy of life, or as an eclectic code of ethical conduct, or even as a new religion... Far from wishing to add to the number of the religious systems, whose conflicting loyalties have for so many generations disturbed the peace of mankind, this Faith is instilling into each of its adherents a new love for, and a genuine appreciation, of the unity underlying the various religions represented within its pale. [WOB 196-197]

Shoghi Effendi notes further the following remarkable and instructive observation by Bahá'u'lláh:

The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. [WOB 203]

In turn, the unity of mankind cannot be established unless and until there is unity of religion. This understanding is therefore a

central piece of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith which aim to establish the oneness of humanity. Establishment of the oneness of the religions represented within its pale is hence also critical to promoting global tranquility. It achieves unity of religion by asserting that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final [WOB 58], and by reminding the followers of Moses, Christ and Muḥammad of the essential moral and ethical dimensions of their Faith.

“All the Prophets of God,” asserts Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *“abide in the same tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech, and proclaim the same Faith.”* From the *“beginning that hath no beginning,”* these Exponents of the Unity of God and Channels of His incessant utterance have shed the light of the invisible Beauty upon mankind, and will continue, to the *“end that hath no end,”* to vouchsafe fresh revelations of His might and additional experiences of His inconceivable glory. To contend that any particular religion is final, that *“all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest”* would indeed be nothing less than sheer blasphemy.

“They differ,” explains Bahá'u'lláh, *“only in the intensity of their revelation and the comparative potency of their light.”* And this, not by reason of any inherent incapacity of any one of them to reveal in a fuller measure the glory of the Message with which He has been entrusted, but rather because of the immaturity and unpreparedness of the age He lived in to apprehend and absorb the full potentialities latent in that Faith. [WOB 58]

Thus, every Divine Prophet is the Way of God, and His Revelation guides humanity along the same Straight Path of truth.

They Who are the Dawning-Places of Revelation and the Manifestations of the Cause of thy Lord, the Most Merciful, Who have sacrificed Their souls and all that They possessed in His Straight Path. [TB 205]

He hath sent forth His Messengers, and sent down His Books, that they may announce unto His creatures the Straight Path. [WOB 211]

The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the Straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.... [GWB 156-157]

Apparent exclusivist statements such as that of Jesus' "*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*" [John 14:6] are to be appreciated in the context that no prophet can be gainsaid in His Dispensation, during which time humanity needs to focus on His particular Message. This understanding that in their essentials the multiple Ways of God represent the One Path of God, and all Dispensations are expressions of the same Faith is a powerful illustration of the evolutionary nature of Divine Revelation. It becomes a potent means for ensuring the organic unity of humanity – a primary purpose of the Tablets of the Divine Plan and of the travel-teaching efforts that they exhort us to engage in.

The siráta almustaqeem is an affirmation of the Oneness of mankind in this Day

The Qur'án explains that humanity is one but that spiritual leaders in possession of the revealed Word have caused divisions largely due to differences in interpretation. It promises that God will, however, rectify the situation for the believers:

*Mankind was one single nation, and God sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book (of Revelation) in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the people of the Book (spiritual leaders in possession of the Book and to interpret it), after the clear Signs came to them, did not differ among themselves, except through selfish contumacy. God by His Grace guided the believers to the Truth, concerning that wherein they differed. For God guides whom He will to a path that is straight.*²⁸

Bahá'u'lláh, 'the Shepherd' of all sections of humanity

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Southern States 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

... the divine policy is justice and kindness toward all mankind. For all the nations of the world are the sheep of God, and God is the kind shepherd. He has created these sheep. He has protected them, sustained and trained them. What greater kindness than this? And every moment we must render a hundred thousand thanksgivings that, praise be to God, we are freed from all the ignorant prejudices, are kind to all the sheep of God, and our utmost hope is to serve each and all, and like unto a benevolent father educate every one.

This is a reference to the statement of Christ anticipating the unification of religious systems and the establishment of ‘one fold and one shepherd’:

I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.

As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. [John 10:14-16]

The Apostle Peter teaches that the elders feed the flock of God in their care without recompense until the Chief Shepherd comes:

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples (examples) to the flock.

And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Today, Bahá'u'lláh, “the Chief Shepherd” guides humanity back to this Straight Path:

O ye children of men: the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race... This is the Straight Path, the fixed and immovable foundation. [WOB 202-203]

The Bahá'ís of North America must guide humanity towards the Straight Path of the Oneness of humanity and the realization that "the earth is but one country and mankind its citizens"

Man has always been one in the sight of God. In support of this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá quotes from the "great Qur'án"²⁹ in the thirteenth Tablet addressed to the Bahá'ís of Canada and Greenland:

"Thou shalt see no difference ('tafawut' or real disparity in the attributes) in the creatures of God." In other words, He says: From the ideal standpoint, there is no variation between the creatures of God, because they are all created by Him. From the above premise, a conclusion is drawn, that there is no difference between countries.

Again He references the Quran¹⁴⁸ in the ninth Tablet addressed to the Bahá'ís of the Northeastern States to indicate that the Light of God, Bahá'u'lláh in this day, does not favor either the East or the West but belongs to all mankind. Now, it is part of the mission of the Bahá'í community of North America to proclaim and live by the principle of the "Oneness of mankind":

All countries, in the estimation of the one true God, are but one country, and all cities and villages are on an equal footing. Neither holds distinction over another. All of them are the fields of God and the habitation of the souls of men.

In every city and village they must occupy themselves with the diffusion of the divine exhortations and advices, guide the souls and promote the oneness of the world of humanity

Hence, love for the Divine Essence and recognition of His Manifestation is the siráta almustaqeem – the Straight Path of God

“Guide Thou us on the Straight Path,” which is: “Show us the right way, that is, honor us with the love of Thine Essence, that we may be freed from turning toward ourselves and toward all else save Thee, and may become wholly Thine, and know only Thee, and see only Thee, and think of none save Thee.” [SV]

The divine Essence, sanctified from every comparison and likeness, is established in the Prophet, and God’s inmost Reality, exalted above any peer or partner, is manifest in Him. [TB, Ishráqát]

Say: O children of dust! He Who is the Spirit of Purity saith: In this glorious Day whatsoever can purge you from defilement and ensure your peace and tranquillity, that indeed is the straight Path, the Path that leadeth unto Me. [TB 171; TU 7-8]

The Şirát is specifically the revealed Divine Word – in this Day, Bahá’u’lláh

He hath clearly set forth His Straight Path in words and utterances of highest eloquence. [TB, Ishráqát]

The episode of Sinai hath been re-enacted in this Revelation and He Who conversed upon the Mount is calling aloud: Verily, the Desired One is come, seated upon the throne of certitude, could ye but perceive it. He hath admonished all men to observe that which is conducive to the exaltation of the Cause of God and will guide mankind unto His Straight Path. [TB 248]

O servants! Verily I say, he is to be accounted as truthful who hath beheld the Straight Path. That Path is

one, and God hath chosen and prepared it. It shineth resplendent amongst all paths as the sun amongst the stars. Whosoever hath not attained it hath failed to apprehend the truth and hath gone astray. Such are the counsels of the incomparable, the peerless Lord. [TU 68]

We have revealed Ourselves unto men, have unveiled the Cause, guided all mankind towards God's Straight Path, promulgated the laws and have enjoined upon everyone that which shall truly profit them both in this world and in the next. [TB 251]

We have truly revealed the signs, demonstrated the irrefutable testimonies and have summoned all men unto the Straight Path. Among the people there are those who have turned away and repudiated the truth, others have pronounced judgement against Us without any proof or evidence. The first to turn away from Us have been the world's spiritual leaders in this age – they that call upon Us in the daytime and in the night season and mention My Name while resting on their lofty thrones. [TB 254]

Recognition of the station of a Manifestation of God is inseparable from following the ordinances of His Revelation [KA 19]. Hence, both represent the Straight Path of God. In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the earlier revelation contained in the Qur'án as the Straight Path and the Way of God.

Perused ye not the Qur'án? Read it, that haply ye may find the Truth, for this Book is verily the Straight Path. This is the Way of God unto all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth... [GWB XVIII]

The Báb declares that He is the Straight Path:

Some of the people of the city have declared: 'We are the helpers of God', but when this Remembrance came

suddenly upon them, they turned aside from helping Us. Verily God is My Lord and your true Lord, therefore worship Him, while this Path from 'Alí [the Báb] is none but the Straight Path in the estimation of your Lord.
[SWB 45]

O concourse of the faithful! Incline your ears to My Voice, proclaimed by this Remembrance of God. Verily God hath revealed unto Me that the Path of the Remembrance which is set forth by Me is, in very truth, the Straight Path of God, and that whoever professeth any religion other than this upright Faith, will, when called to account on the Day of Judgement, discover that as recorded in the Book no benefit hath he reaped out of God's Religion... [SWB 63]

Bahá'u'lláh similarly announces that He is the Guide to the Straight Path.

I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. [TB]

O Living Temple! We, verily, have made Thee a mirror unto the kingdom of names, that Thou mayest be, amidst all mankind, a sign of My sovereignty, a herald unto My presence, a summoner unto My beauty, and a guide unto My Straight and perspicuous Path. [SLH 43]

And furthermore that His Revelation today represents the Straight Path of God:

This is a Book which hath become the Lamp of the Eternal unto the world, and His straight, undeviating Path amidst the peoples of the earth. Say: This is the Dayspring of Divine knowledge, if ye be of them that understand, and the Dawning-place of God's commandments, if ye be of those who comprehend. [KA 87]

He equates the Straight Path of God in this Day with the Great News or Great Announcement of the Qur'án:³⁰

My Forerunner (the Báb), Who laid down His life for this Great Announcement, this Straight Path. [ESW 141]

Say, O My loved ones in My lands! ... He hath made known unto you His Straight Path and hath acquainted you with His Great Announcement. [TB 121]

Acquaint the people with the holy verses of thy Lord and make known unto them His Straight Path, His mighty Announcement. [TB 52]

... all heavenly Scriptures bear evidence to its overpowering majesty. In this Day the Book solemnly testifieth to His glory and the Balance is moved to lift up its voice. This is the Day wherein the Şirát calleth aloud: 'I am the Straight Path', and Mount Sinai exclaimeth: 'Verily the Lord of Revelation is come.' [TB 237]

The Qur'án warns the individual that he has the choice of either rejecting the Revelation or taking the Straight Path to God

This is an admonition: Whosoever will, let him take a (straight) Path to his Lord.³¹

This exhortation is again enforced by Bahá'u'lláh:

Thus doth the Nightingale utter His call unto you from this prison. He hath but to deliver this clear message. Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord. [Tablet of Ahmad, in BP 210]

For the followers of Bahá'u'lláh the Širáṭu'l-Mustaqím is heeding His Call to arise and proclaim His Faith to all mankind

O Lord, my God! Praise and thanksgiving be unto Thee for Thou hast guided me to the highway of the kingdom, suffered me to walk in this Straight and far-stretching path, illumined my eye by beholding the splendors of Thy light, inclined my ear to the melodies of the birds of holiness from the kingdom of mysteries and attracted my heart with Thy love among the righteous.

O Lord! Confirm me with the Holy Spirit, so that I may call in Thy Name amongst the nations and give the glad tidings of the manifestation of Thy kingdom amongst mankind. [TDP]

The Herald of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, “commanded the sovereigns of the earth to arise and teach His Cause” [GPB 376], and Bahá'u'lláh admonished every one of His followers to teach the Cause of God, “for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message” [GWB 278]. Any Bahá'í engaged in this activity is hence treading the Straight Path and is transformed by the experience.

Consistent with this explanation is that verse 6 of *súrah Al-Fátihah* referring to *aṣ-širáṭa al-mustaqím* in the second letter of the Tablets of Divine Plan is interposed between a statement about the importance of teaching at least one soul and an exhortation to travel teach:

One of the holy Manifestations, addressing a believing soul, has said that, if a person become the cause of the illumination of one soul, it is better than a boundless treasury. If God guide, through thee, one soul, it is better for thee than all the riches!” Again He says, “Direct us to the Straight Path!” that is, Show us the right road. It is also mentioned in the Gospel: Travel ye

to all parts of the world and give ye the glad tidings of the appearance of the Kingdom of God. [TDP 11]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá associated the Straight Path in several of His other Writings with teaching and guiding humanity to the Truths of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh:

I beseech Him to assist those brethren to promote His Word in those most distant places, cause them to be servants to His precious olive-garden, keepers of His inaccessible fortress and guides to his Straight Path! [TAB 599]

Verily I supplicate God in heart and spirit to make you signs of guidance, standards of sanctity and fountains of knowledge and understanding, that through you He may guide the seekers unto the Straight Path and lead them unto the Mighty Way in this Great Cycle. [TAB 408]

If this be the endeavor, strive with life and heart and guide the people to the Kingdom of God, lead them to the Straight Pathway, inform them of the greatness and magnitude of this Cause and give them the glad-tidings through the bounty of divine providence and the revelation of the Sun of Truth in this great age. [TAB 360]

Verily I supplicate God in heart and spirit to make you signs of guidance, standards of sanctity and fountains of knowledge and understanding, that through you He may guide the seekers unto the Straight Path and lead them unto the Mighty Way in this Great Cycle. [TAB 407]

O thou who art conscious!

At last thou didst learn of the path of salvation and didst find the straight way. [TAB 309]

Verily I read thy recent letter, and noted its beautiful contents and meanings which proved thy firmness in the Straight Path. [TAB 259]

The Şiráţu'l-Mustaqím is also a reference that our duty to teach should entail 'opening the eyes' and increasing perception. Those engaged in this holy endeavor must so kindle the love of God and the desire of Truth in the hearts and souls of the seekers that all will cry out to attain the Şiráţu'l-Mustaqím

'Abdu'l-Bahá thus summarizes our purpose as the followers of Bahá'u'lláh:

They must make the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the extinguished one enkindled and set aglow, and the dead quickened. [TAB 721]

This understanding is also implicit in the daily prayer revealed in the Tablets of the Divine Plan for those who are engaged in teaching. It contains the second reference to verse 6 of *súrah al-Fátihah*:

O Thou kind Lord! Praise be unto Thee that Thou hast shown us the highway of guidance, opened the doors of the kingdom and manifested Thyself through the Sun of Reality. To the blind Thou hast given sight; to the deaf Thou hast granted hearing; Thou hast resuscitated the dead; Thou hast enriched the poor; Thou hast shown the way to those who have gone astray; Thou hast led those with parched lips to the fountain of guidance; Thou hast suffered the thirsty fish to reach the ocean of reality; and Thou hast invited the wandering birds to the rose garden of grace.

O Thou Almighty! We are Thy servants and Thy poor ones; we are remote and yearn for Thy presence, are athirst for the water of Thy fountain,³² are ill, longing

for Thy healing. We are walking in Thy path and have no aim or hope save the diffusion of Thy fragrance, so that all souls may raise the cry: O God, "Guide us to the Straight Path." May their eyes be opened to behold the light, and may they be freed from the darkness of ignorance. May they gather around the lamp of Thy guidance. May every portionless one receive a share. May the deprived become the confidants of Thy mysteries.

O Almighty! Look upon us with the glance of mercifulness. Grant us heavenly confirmation. Bestow upon us the breath of the Holy Spirit, so that we may be assisted in Thy service and, like unto brilliant stars, shine in these regions with the light of Thy guidance.

Verily, Thou art the Powerful, the Mighty, the Wise and the Seeing. [TDP 61-65]

Praise be to God! you have heard the call of the Kingdom. Your eyes are opened; you have turned to God. Your purpose is the good-pleasure of God, the understanding of the mysteries of the heart and investigation of the realities. Day and night you must strive that you may attain to the significances of the heavenly kingdom, perceive the signs of divinity, acquire certainty of knowledge and realize that this world has a creator, a vivifier, a provider, an architect, — knowing this through proofs and evidences and not through susceptibilities, — nay, rather, through decisive arguments and real vision [FWU 65].

The servants who dedicate themselves to the education of the world and to the edification of its peoples — They are, in truth, cup-bearers of the life-giving water of knowledge and guides unto the ideal way. They direct the peoples of the world to the Straight Path and acquaint them with that which is conducive to human

upliftment and exaltation. The Straight Path is the one which guideth man to the dayspring of perception and to the dawning-place of true understanding and leadeth him to that which will redound to glory, honour and greatness. [TB 35]

Have not His instructions paved before us the broad and Straight Path of Teaching? [BA 16]

Bahá'u'lláh admonishes the religious leaders that, through blind imitation and fanaticism, have misguided their followers and caused them to deviate from the Straight Path

Quoting the Qur'án He writes in the mighty Íqán [KI 16]:

Thus He (Prophet Muḥammad) saith:

“O people of the Book! Why disbelieve the signs of God to which ye yourselves have been witnesses?” [Qur'án, 3:70]

And also He saith: “O people of the Book! Why clothe ye the truth with falsehood? Why wittingly hide the truth?” [Qur'án, 3:71]

Again, He saith: “Say, O people of the Book! Why repel believers from the way of God?” [Qur'án, 3:99]

Again, He wrote:

The blind fanaticism of former times hath withheld the hapless creatures from the Straight Path. [ESW 162]

We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions. We see it languishing on its bed of sickness, sore-tried and disillusioned. They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the

Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy. They have conceived the straight to be crooked, and have imagined their friend an enemy. [GWB 213]

The Lord of the world saith: O servants! Forsake your own desires and seek that which I have desired for you. Walk ye not without one to guide you on the way, and accept ye not the words of every guide. How numerous the guides who have gone astray and failed to discover the Straight Path! He alone is a guide who is free from the bondage of this world and whom nothing whatsoever can deter from speaking the truth. [TU 70]

Those eminent divines and men of learning who walk the Straight Pathway and are versed in the secrets of divine wisdom and informed of the inner realities of the sacred Books; who wear in their hearts the jewel of the fear of God, and whose luminous faces shine with the lights of salvation – these are alert to the present need and they understand the requirements of modern times, and certainly devote all their energies toward encouraging the advancement of learning and civilization. “Are they equal, those who know, and those who do not know?... Or is the darkness equal with the light?” [SDC 34; Qur’án 39:12; 13:17]

The Şiráţu’l-Mustaqím also refers to the spiritual qualities acquired through the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, which in turn is a testimony of the transforming power of His Revelation

Lay not aside the fear of God, O kings of the earth, and beware that ye transgress not the bounds which the Almighty hath fixed. Observe the injunctions laid upon

you in His Book, and take good heed not to overstep their limits. Be vigilant, that ye may not do injustice to anyone, be it to the extent of a grain of mustard seed. Tread ye the path of justice, for this, verily, is the Straight Path. [SLH 188; PDC 22]

O my friend! In all circumstances one should seize upon every means which will promote security and tranquillity among the peoples of the world. The Great Being saith: In this glorious Day whatever will purge you from corruption and will lead you towards peace and composure, is indeed the Straight Path. [TB 171]

A goodly character is a means whereby men are guided to the Straight Path and are led to the Great Announcement. Well is it with him who is adorned with the saintly attributes and character of the Concourse on High. [TB 35]

Disencumber yourselves of all attachment to this world and the vanities thereof. Beware that ye approach them not, inasmuch as they prompt you to walk after your own lusts and covetous desires, and hinder you from entering the Straight and glorious Path. [GWB 276]

Theme two: Individual Bahá'ís must undergo a spiritual baptism if their teaching efforts are to prove effective

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of Canada and Greenland (#13), 'Abdu'l-Bahá expands on the essential qualities of an effective teacher.

As regards the teachers, they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment. According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth — that is, whereas in the first instance they were born from the

womb of the mother, this time they must be born from the womb of the world of nature. Just as they are now totally unaware of the experiences of the fetal world, they must also forget entirely the defects of the world of nature. They must be baptized with the water of life, the fire of the love of God and the breaths of the Holy Spirit; be satisfied with little food, but take a large portion from the heavenly table. They must disengage themselves from temptation and covetousness, and be filled with the spirit.

“... they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment”, and “they must attain to the station of rebirth”

Those engaged in teaching must not be bound by effete tradition and customs and outdated ideas, but instead, they must resolutely present the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in its pure and pristine form. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to a similar requirement in the time of Christ.

On being questioned as to why His disciples did not follow the laws and traditions of the Dispensation of Moses, Jesus explained that the truths of every new Dispensation require a new format for their adequate expression:

And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?

And Jesus said unto them, ...

No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse.

And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled,

and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.

And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they (your disciples) on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?

And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath:

Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.

[Mark 2:18-19; 21-22; 24; 27-28]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in the thirteenth Tablet of the Divine Plan, refers to this passage and exhorts Bahá’í teachers to also undergo a spiritual baptism:

... they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment. According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth – that is, whereas in the first instance they were born from the womb of the mother, this time they must be born from the womb of the world of nature. Just as they are now totally unaware of the experiences of the fetal world, they must also forget entirely the defects of the world of nature. They must be baptized with the water of life, the fire of the love of God and the breaths of the Holy Spirit; be satisfied with little food, but take a large portion from the heavenly table. They must disengage themselves from temptation and covetousness, and be filled with the spirit. Through the effect of their pure breath, they must change the stone into the brilliant ruby and the shell into pearl. Like unto the cloud of vernal shower, they must transform the black soil into the rose garden and orchard. They must make the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the extinguished one enkindled and set aglow, and the dead quickened.

“According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth ... They must be baptized with the water of life, the fire of the love of God and the breaths of the Holy Spirit” – Faith and man reborn through the trumpet-blast of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation and the diffusion of its Truths

In the last Tablet to Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada ‘Abdu’l-Bahá returns to this topic – explaining by quoting the Gospels that materialism begets materialism whilst spirituality attracts spirituality:

Every one of the important souls must arise, blowing over all parts of America the breath of life, conferring upon the people a new spirit, baptizing them with the fire of the love of God, the water of life, and the breaths of the Holy Spirit so that the second birth may become realized. For it is written in the Gospel: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

The Apostle Paul explains that John, the Herald of Christ, “baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” [Acts 19:4]. Symbolically, as they immersed themselves in the river and washed away the grime of this mundane world they at the same time, and as attested by John the Baptist Himself, prepared themselves for a spiritual rebirth through Christ:

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire. [Matthew 3:11]

(Notably, “Jesus himself baptized not (literally), but his disciples” did so [John 4:2].)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement is also a reference to the following explanation that Christ gives to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin and keeper of traditions of the Dispensation of Moses – only a spiritual rebirth allows the individual to “see”:

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [John 3:3-6]

“Blessed,” i.e. sanctified and consecrated

In the third Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the Central States ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that the Faith requires “blessed souls and detached teachers”. In the sixth Tablet He writes:

Now is the time for you to divest yourselves of the garment of attachment to this world that perisheth, to be wholly severed from the physical world, become heavenly angels, and travel to these countries. I swear by Him, besides Whom there is none other God, that each one of you will become an Israfil³³ of Life, and will blow the Breath of Life into the souls of others.

And again in the same communication:

... fluent speakers, who are detached from aught else save God, attracted with the fragrances of God, and sanctified and purified from all desires and temptations.

Their sustenance and food must consist of the teachings of God. First they must themselves live in accordance with those principles, then guide the people.

These essential qualities are emphasized by Bahá'u'lláh as quoted by Shoghi Effendi:

Say: O servants! The triumph of this Cause hath depended, and will continue to depend, upon the appearance of holy souls, upon the showing forth of goodly deeds, and the revelation of words of consummate wisdom. ... "Let your principal concern be to rescue the fallen from the slough of impending extinction, and to help him embrace the ancient Faith of God. Your behavior towards your neighbor should be such as to manifest clearly the signs of the one true God, for ye are the first among men to be re-created by His Spirit, the first to adore and bow the knee before Him, the first to circle round His throne of glory." [ADJ 82-83]

"By the righteousness of God!" writes Bahá'u'lláh, *"The world, its vanities and its glory, and whatever delights it can offer, are all, in the sight of God, as worthless as, nay even more contemptible than, dust and ashes. Would that the hearts of men could comprehend it. Wash yourselves thoroughly, O people of Bahá, from the defilement of the world, and of all that pertaineth unto it. God Himself beareth Me witness! The things of the earth ill beseem you. Cast them away unto such as may desire them, and fasten your eyes upon this most holy and effulgent Vision."* *"O ye My loved ones!"* He thus exhorts His followers, *"Suffer not the hem of My sacred vesture to be smirched and mired with the things of this world, and follow not the promptings of your evil and corrupt desires."* And again, *"O ye the beloved of the one true God! Pass beyond the narrow retreats of your evil and corrupt desires, and advance into the vast*

immensity of the realm of God, and abide ye in the meads of sanctity and of detachment, that the fragrance of your deeds may lead the whole of mankind to the ocean of God's unfading glory." "Disencumber yourselves," He thus commands them, "*of all attachment to this world and the vanities thereof.*" [ADJ 30-31]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the necessary qualities of Bahá’í teachers as “severed, holy, sanctified and filled with the love of God” (seventh Tablet of the Divine Plan), and as “souls who are in a condition of the utmost severance, purified from the defects of the world of nature, sanctified from attachment to this earth, vivified with the breaths of eternal life” (eleventh Tablet of the Divine Plan).

Shoghi Effendi describes the vision guiding the followers of Bahá’u’lláh as similar to that which motivated the early Christians:

Of such men and women it may be truly said that to them “every foreign land is a fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land.” For their citizenship, it must be remembered, is in the Kingdom of Bahá’u’lláh. Though willing to share to the utmost the temporal benefits and the fleeting joys which this earthly life can confer, though eager to participate in whatever activity that conduces to the richness, the happiness and peace of that life, they can, at no time, forget that it constitutes no more than a transient, a very brief stage of their existence, that they who live it are but pilgrims and wayfarers whose goal is the Celestial City, and whose home the Country of never-failing joy and brightness. [WOB 198]

They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners (wayfarers) ; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers.

Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign...

Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.

They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives...

They love all men, and they are persecuted by all...

They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted, and they respect...

Doing good they are punished as evil-doers; being punished they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life.³⁴

Detachment – Shake off the very dust from your feet

In the Tablets of Western States (#12 of 14) He writes:

(The teachers of the Cause) must be embodied spirit, personified intellect, and arise in service with the utmost firmness, steadfastness and self-sacrifice. In their journeys they must not be attached to food and clothing. They must concentrate their thoughts on the outpourings of the Kingdom of God and beg for the confirmations of the Holy Spirit. With a divine power, with an attraction of consciousness, with heavenly glad tidings and celestial holiness they must perfume the nostrils with the fragrances of the Paradise of Abhá.

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (#8 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Teachers must continually travel to all parts of the continent, nay, rather, to all parts of the world, but they must travel like 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who journeyed throughout the cities of America. He was sanctified and free

from every attachment and in the utmost severance. Just as His Holiness Christ says: Shake off the very dust from your feet.

The reference is to the admonishment of Christ to His disciples about detachment and how they should handle rejection whilst travel-teaching:

These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying ...

And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses,

Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat.

And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it: but if it be not worthy, let your peace return to you.

And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. [Matthew 10:5, 7-10, 13-14]

Christ's instructions are repeated in the Gospel of Mark:

And he called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two...

And commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse:

But be shod with sandals; and not put on two coats.

And he said unto them, In what place soever ye enter into an house, there abide till ye depart from that place.

And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them... [Mark 6:7-11]

At the time of the Gospel, pious Jews on leaving Gentile cities often shook the dust from their feet to show their separation from Gentile practices. By shaking off the dust of a place from their feet the disciples symbolically showed that the people rejecting their message were making a wrong choice. They had done as bidden by Christ and were not required to linger on or argue with folks who refuse the message and contend with people who had shut their ears. If they were not receptive their instructions were not to bother with them – not even with their dust! They certainly should not leave the place expecting compensation for their efforts. Bahá'í teachers are to demonstrate the same attitudes:

As to those souls who are preaching the Word of God, it behooveth them to shake the dust of every land which they have passed by off their shoes and to be with God and without need of the rich – although their bed is the soil, their light is the stars of the sky and their food is the herbs of the desert – because theirs is the wealth of the Kingdom, the honor of the realm of might and the bounty of the divine world; and they are not in want of this world and its cares. Their throne is the mat of humility, their honor is in suffering every lowliness in the path of the Loving Lord and their wealth is being empty-handed from the pomps of the world and its vanities and their provision is trusting in God and being severed from all that is on the earth and its wealth. [TAB 60-61]

Contention is similarly forbidden in our Faith

Christ had declared “*by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*” [John 13:35]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also states that the believers in the arena of teaching must demonstrate love and fellowship towards each other (#8 of 14):

The divine friends must be attracted to and enamored of each other and ever be ready and willing to sacrifice their own lives for each other. O ye friends! Fellowship, fellowship! Love, love! Unity, unity! – so that the power of the Bahá’í Cause may appear and become manifest in the world of existence.

If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute may arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. Should there appear the least trace of controversy, they must remain silent, and both parties must continue their discussions no longer, but ask the reality of the question from the Interpreter.

Elsewhere, He states:

O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God’s grace. It is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the spirit of love and loving-kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. [WT 13]

O army of God! Beware lest ye harm any soul, or make any heart to sorrow; lest ye wound any man with your words, be he known to you or a stranger, be he friend or foe. Pray ye for all; ask ye that all be blessed, all be forgiven. Beware, beware, lest any of you seek vengeance, even against one who is thirsting for your blood. Beware, beware, lest ye offend the feelings of another, even though he be an evil-doer, and he wish you ill. Look ye not upon the creatures, turn ye to their Creator. [SWAB 73]

The Báb instructed that the teacher listen attentively to a seeker and present valid proofs of faith without contention.

Take heed to carefully consider the words of every soul, then hold fast to the proofs which attest the truth. If ye fail to discover truth in a person's words, make them not the object of contention, inasmuch as ye have been forbidden in the Bayán to enter into idle disputation and controversy, that perchance on the Day of Resurrection ye may not engage in argumentation, and dispute with Him Whom God shall make manifest. [SWB 134]

Bahá'u'lláh prohibited contentious arguments:

Revile ye not one another. We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth... If anyone revile you, or trouble touch you, in the path of God, be patient, and put your trust in Him Who heareth, Who seeth... ye have been forbidden to engage in contention and conflict. [ESW 24]

“Living sacrifice”

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of Canada and Greenland (#5 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that “*the believers of God must become self-sacrificing ...*” In His Will and Testament He writes:

The disciples of Christ forgot themselves and all earthly things, forsook all their cares and belongings, purged themselves of self and passion and with absolute detachment scattered far and wide and engaged in calling the peoples of the world to the Divine Guidance, till at last they made the world another world, illumined the surface of the earth and even to their last hour proved self-sacrificing in the pathway of that Beloved One of God. Finally in various lands they suffered glorious martyrdom. Let them that are men of action follow in their footsteps! [WT 10-11]

The term “living sacrifice” was coined by the Apostle Paul who admonished the Christians in Rome to sacrifice themselves to God, not as a sacrifice on the altar, as the Mosaic Law required the sacrifice of animals, but by consecrating their lives to God:

I beseech you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. [Romans 12:12]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in turn exhorts us to become a living sacrifice in the path of teaching:

Even as dust upon the Sacred Threshold, in utter humility and lowliness, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is engaged in the promulgation of His signs in the daytime and in the night season. Whensoever he findeth time he prayeth ardently, and beseecheth Him tearfully and fervently, saying:

O Thou divine Providence, pitiful are we, grant us Thy succour; homeless wanderers, give us Thy shelter; scattered, do Thou unite us; astray, gather us to Thy fold; bereft, do Thou bestow upon us a share and portion; athirst, lead us to the well-spring of Life; frail, strengthen us that we may arise to help Thy Cause and offer ourselves as a living sacrifice in the pathway of guidance. [SWAB 315]

As attested by Bahíyyih Khánum, the Greatest Holy Leaf, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a living sacrifice to the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh. [BK 199]

Shoghi Effendi also writes on this topic:

The community of the organized promoters of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh in the American continent — the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age, who by their death proclaimed the birth of that Faith — must, in turn, usher in, not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter. While its sister communities are bending beneath the tempestuous winds that beat upon them from every side, this community, preserved by the immutable decrees of the omnipotent Ordainer and deriving continual sustenance from the mandate with which the Tablets of the Divine Plan have invested it, is now busily engaged in laying the foundations and in fostering the growth of those institutions which are to herald the approach of the Age destined to witness the birth and rise of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. [ADJ 7]

Theme three: Creation of unity in the world and maintenance of unity in the faith

“Take ye hold of the Cord of God, all of you, and become ye not disunited”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in the fourteenth Tablet that although there are many means for bringing people together none is as effective, comprehensive and permanent as Faith:

In the contingent world there are many collective centers which are conducive to association and unity between the children of men. For example, patriotism is a collective center; nationalism is a collective center; identity of interests is a collective center; political alliance is a collective center; the union of ideals is a collective center, and the prosperity of the world of humanity is dependent upon the organization and promotion of the collective centers. Nevertheless, all the above institutions are, in reality, the matter and not the substance, accidental and not eternal – temporary and not everlasting. With the appearance of great revolutions and upheavals, all these collective centers are swept away. But the Collective Center of the Kingdom, embodying the institutions and divine teachings, is the eternal Collective Center. It establishes relationship between the East and the West, organizes the oneness of the world of humanity, and destroys the foundation of differences. It overcomes and includes all the other collective centers. Like unto the ray of the sun, it dispels entirely the darkness encompassing all the regions, bestows ideal life, and causes the effulgence of divine illumination. Through the breaths of the Holy Spirit it performs miracles; the Orient and the Occident embrace each other, the North and South become intimates and associates, conflicting and contending opinions disappear, antagonistic aims are brushed aside,

the law of the struggle for existence is abrogated, and the canopy of the oneness of the world of humanity is raised on the apex of the globe, casting its shade over all the races of men. Consequently, the real Collective Center is the body of the divine teachings, which include all the degrees and embrace all the universal relations and necessary laws of humanity.

For the Faith to create the unity of mankind it cannot become disunited internally

In the fourth Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (#14/14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá' quotes the following from the Qur'án:

Take ye hold of the Cord of God, all of you, and become ye not disunited.

The entire verse is as follows and underlines the power of Faith to transform hatred and enmity to love and unity:

*And hold ye fast by the cord of God, all of you and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude God's favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the Pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth God make His Signs clear to you: That ye may be guided.*³⁵

Shoghi Effendi explains that "The word 'cord' so often mentioned in the Teachings means both the Faith itself and also the power of the Faith which sustains those who cling to it."³⁶ This power derives its strength from the Covenant.

In His Will and Testament 'Abdu'l-Bahá also warns us to remain firm in the Covenant if we are to remain on the Straight Path

O ye beloved of the Lord! Strive with all your heart to shield the Cause of God from the onslaught of the insincere, for souls such as these cause the Straight to become crooked and all benevolent efforts to produce contrary results.

O God, my God! I call Thee, Thy Prophets and Thy Messengers, Thy Saints and Thy Holy Ones, to witness that I have declared conclusively Thy Proofs unto Thy loved ones and set forth clearly all things unto them, that they may watch over Thy Faith, guard Thy Straight Path and protect Thy Resplendent Law. Thou art, verily, the All-Knowing, the All-wise! [WT 22]

In the third Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (#8 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that to achieve unity, firmness in the Covenant must become the first duty of ever soldier in the armies of God:

The first condition is firmness in the Covenant of God. For the power of the Covenant will protect the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh from the doubts of the people of error. It is the fortified fortress of the Cause of God and the firm pillar of the religion of God. Today no power can conserve the oneness of the Bahá'í world save the Covenant of God; otherwise differences like unto a most great tempest will encompass the Bahá'í world. It is evident that the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else. Had the Covenant not come to pass, had it not been revealed from the Supreme Pen and had not the Book of the Covenant, like unto the ray of the Sun of Reality, illuminated the world, the forces of the Cause of God would have been utterly scattered and certain souls who

were the prisoners of their own passions and lusts would have taken into their hands an axe, cutting the root of this Blessed Tree. Every person would have pushed forward his own desire and every individual aired his own opinion!... Therefore, in the beginning the believers must make their steps firm in the Covenant so that the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh may encircle them from all sides, the cohorts of the Supreme Concourse may become their supporters and helpers, and the exhortations and advices of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, like unto the pictures engraved on stone, may remain permanent and ineffaceable in the tablets of all hearts.

Theme four: The holy spirit and transformative power of the word of god

The “Holy Spirit (Ghost)” (*ruach ha-kodesh* or the breath of God in Hebrew, and *Rúḥ al-Qudus* in Arabic). The Qur’án states that Christ was fortified by the *Rúḥ al-Qudus*.³⁷ Also, the Qur’án states that it was the source of Muḥammad’s Message³⁸.

In the last Tablet of the Divine Plan ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the power of the Holy Spirit to once again revive humanity and, in particular, to create unity:

Consider how the religions of God served the world of humanity! How the religion of Torah became conducive to the glory and honor and progress of the nation of Israel! How the breaths of the Holy Spirit of His Holiness Christ created affinity and unity between divergent communities and quarreling families! How the sacred power of His Holiness Muḥammad became the means of uniting and harmonizing the contentious tribes and the different clans of Peninsular Arabia – to such an extent that one thousand tribes were welded into one tribe; strife and discord were done away with; all of them unitedly and with one accord strove in

advancing the cause of culture and civilization, and thus were freed from the lowest degree of degradation, soaring toward the height of everlasting glory! Is it possible to find a greater Collective Center in the phenomenal world than this? In comparison to this divine Collective Center, the national collective center, the patriotic collective center, the political collective center and the cultural and intellectual collective center are like child's play!

Now strive ye that the Collective Center of the sacred religions – for the inculcation of which all the Prophets were manifested and which is no other than the spirit of the divine teachings – be spread in all parts of America, so that each one of you may shine forth from the horizon of reality like unto the morning star, divine illumination may overcome the darkness of nature, and the world of humanity may become enlightened. This is the most great work! Should you become confirmed therein, this world will become another world, the surface of the earth will become the delectable paradise, and eternal Institutions be founded.

The friends must rely on Bahá'u'lláh and the creative power of His Word³⁹ – they must call on the Holy Spirit for assistance

'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Southern States (#10 of 14) asks every teacher to read a prayer with the following invocation:

How can I succeed unless Thou assist me with the breath of the Holy Spirit, help me to triumph by the hosts of Thy glorious kingdom, and shower upon me Thy confirmations, which alone can change a gnat into an eagle, a drop of water into rivers and seas, and an atom into lights and suns?

In the Tablet addressed to the Bahá'ís of Northeastern states (#1 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá quotes the Qur'án:

The soil was black and dried. Then we caused the rain to descend upon it and immediately it became green, verdant, and every kind of plant sprouted up luxuriantly.

This refers to the following verse of the Book:

O men! if ye doubt as to the resurrection ... And thou hast seen the earth dried up and barren: but when We send down the rain upon it, it stirreth and swelleth, and groweth every kind of luxuriant herb.

This, for that God is the Truth, and that it is He who quickeneth the dead, and that He hath power over everything:

*And that "the Hour" will indeed come – there is no doubt of it – and that God will wake up to life those who are in the tombs.*⁴⁰

'Abdu'l-Bahá expands:

In other words, He says the earth is black, but when the spring showers descend upon it that black soil is quickened, and variegated flowers are pushed forth. This means the souls of humanity belonging to the world of nature are black like unto the soil. But when the heavenly outpourings descend and the radiant effulgences appear, the hearts are resuscitated, are liberated from the darkness of nature and the flowers of divine mysteries grow and become luxuriant. Consequently man must become the cause of the illumination of the world of humanity and propagate the holy teachings revealed in the sacred books through the divine inspiration... Praise be to God, that the Northeastern States are in the utmost capacity.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation provides three lessons. First, we have a duty to be the cause of illumination of mankind. Second, this success requires “propagation of the sacred book” which clearly include the Bible and the Qur’án. Third, the Divine Word, re-voiced to humanity, is capable of renewing the spiritual life of humanity. It is this transformation, the “supreme and distinguishing function of His (Bahá’u’lláh’s) Revelation which is none other than the calling into being of a new race of men.” [ADJ 16]

Bahá’u’lláh, referring to the transformation effected by every Revelation in the ways, thoughts and manners of the people, reveals these words: *“Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God’s universal Manifestations would be apparent.”* [WOB 25]

It constitutes the greatest proof of the Divine Word — the “good fruits” of the “good Tree” of true Faith.

The Gospel of John rings out with the statement that the Divine Word or *Kalimah* is capable of transforming darkness into light and reviving seemingly spiritually lifeless souls:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not (can never extinguish it)...

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. [John 1:1-5, 11-13]

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus asks that the validity of the future Revelation from God be tested and recognized by its fruits:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. [Matthew 7:16-20]

And, the Qur'án similarly speaks of the good fruits of a good tree:

Seest thou not how God sets forth a parable? — A good Word is as a good tree: whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the heavens,

It brings forth its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord. So God sets forth parables for men, in order that they may receive admonition.

And the parable of an evil Word is that of an evil tree: it is torn up by the root from the surface of the earth: it has no stability.

*God will establish in strength those who believe, with the Word that stands firm, in this world And in the Hereafter; but God will leave, to stray, those who do wrong: God doeth what He willeth.*⁴¹

Emulating the early followers of Christ, the apostles of Bahá'u'lláh must become spiritual farmers and toil in the field of service to humanity. Their concern must be to plant the seed (Word) – God will water the soil and the seed will reveal its inherent potentialities depending on the Divine Will and the receptivity of the souls.

... the ground is rich, the rain of the divine outpouring is descending. Now you must become heavenly farmers and scatter pure seeds in the prepared soil. The harvest of every other seed is limited, but the bounty and the blessing of the seed of the divine teachings is unlimited.
[TDP 6]

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Central States (#3 of 14), 'Abdu'l-Bahá also writes:

A person declaring the glad tidings of the appearance of the realities and significances of the Kingdom is like unto a farmer who scatters pure seeds in the rich soil. The spring cloud will pour upon them the rain of bounty, and unquestionably the station of the farmer will be raised in the estimation of the lord of the village, and many harvests will be gathered.

Therefore, ye friends of God! Appreciate ye the value of this time and be ye engaged in the sowing of the seeds, so that you may find the heavenly blessing and the lordly bestowal. Upon you be Bahá'u'l-Abhá!

The allusions are to a parable of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus explains that the farmer should not be too

concerned with the fate of the seed for that is largely outside his control:

And he (Jesus) spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:

And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold...

When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.

But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it;

Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.

He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.

But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also

beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. [Matthew 13:1-23]

The heavenly armies of the Lord of Hosts

The Lord of Hosts is referred to in the Bible as 'Elohe Tzevaot' or 'Yahweh Sabaoth'. In the account of Elishá (successor to the Prophet Elijá) there is a realization by his young servant, when his eyes were opened, that the supporting hosts of heaven were more numerous than the armies of the king who had come to attack them:

Therefore sent he (King of Syria) thither horses, and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night, and compassed the city about.

And when the servant of the man of God (Elishá) was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do?

And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.

And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. [2 Kings 6:14-17]

In the New Testament, the forces of darkness are defeated by the Heavenly Host led by the Archangel Michael during the anticipated spiritual war [Revelation 12:7-9]. The Qur'án also refers to the Hosts of thy Lord of Hosts as *junooda rabbika*:

*... God lead astray whomsoever He will and guide whomsoever He will. And none knows the hosts of thy Lord but He...*⁴²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in the third general Tablet to the Bahá’ís of United States and Canada (#8 of 14):

The Blessed Person of the Promised One is interpreted in the Holy Book as the Lord of Hosts — the heavenly armies. By heavenly armies those souls are intended who are entirely freed from the human world, transformed into celestial spirits and have become divine angels. Such souls are the rays of the Sun of Reality who will illumine all the continents. Each one is holding in his hand a trumpet, blowing the breath of life over all the regions. They are delivered from human qualities and the defects of the world of nature, are characterized with the characteristics of God, and are attracted with the fragrances of the Merciful. Like unto the apostles of Christ, who were filled with Him, these souls also have become filled with His Holiness Bahá’u’lláh; that is, the love of Bahá’u’lláh has so mastered every organ, part and limb of their bodies, as to leave no effect from the promptings of the human world.

He exhorts the “Apostles of Bahá’u’lláh” to enroll as soldiers in the armies of God:

These souls are the armies of God and the conquerors of the East and the West. Should one of them turn his face toward some direction and summon the people to the Kingdom of God, all the ideal forces and lordly confirmations will rush to his support and reinforcement. He will behold all the doors open and all the strong fortifications and impregnable castles razed to the ground. Singly and alone he will attack the armies of the world, defeat the right and left wings of the hosts of all the countries, break through the lines of the legions of all the nations and carry his attack to the very center of the powers of the earth. This is the meaning of the Hosts of God.

Today, Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of the Lord of Hosts as indicated in the second Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (#7 of 14):

Praise be to ... the Desired One that ye have become confirmed in the promotion of divine teachings in that vast Continent, raised the call of the Kingdom of God in that region and announced the glad tidings of the manifestation of the Lord of Hosts and His Highness the Promised One. Thanks be unto the Lord that ye have become assisted and confirmed in this aim. This is purely through the confirmations of the Lord of Hosts and the breaths of the Holy Spirit.

Again in the Tablet He writes:

... with eyes turned to the Kingdom of God, they must deliver the glad tidings of the manifestation of the Lord of Hosts to all the people.

And in the tenth Tablet:

... help me to triumph by the hosts of Thy glorious kingdom, and shower upon me Thy confirmations

The Guardian referred obliquely to the American believers who had arisen to pioneer as the Hosts of Heaven:

Because there have been so many applicants in America, the Guardian has written them that they may place their pioneers in any virgin area in the world. His objective now is to fill these lands yet unconquered by the Hosts of Heaven and he feels the initial impact must be made now... Furthermore, as the Chief Executors of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, He expects the Americans to bear the brunt of the load everywhere. [UD, letter 1953 June 5]

Theme five: The light of unity will envelop the whole earth

God promises that “He will lead them from darkness into Light”

At the beginning of creation God will that there should be light:

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that [it was] good: and God divided the light from the darkness. [Genesis 1:3-4]

The Prophet Isaiah promises that the Light will appear sevenfold stronger [Isaiah 30:26], and the Revelation of St. John states that the Glory of God (Bahá'u'lláh) will be the Light of the City:

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it ...

And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.

And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. [Revelation 21:23-27]

Bahá'u'lláh has fulfilled this promise:

At a time when darkness had encompassed the world, the ocean of divine favour surged and His Light was made manifest, that the doings of men might be laid bare. This, verily, is that Light which hath been foretold in the heavenly scriptures. Should the Almighty so please, the hearts of all men will be purged and purified through His goodly utterance, and the light of unity will shed its radiance upon every soul and revive the whole earth. [TU 8]

Today, the North American Bahá'í community has the responsibility to declare that Bahá'u'lláh has brought the Divine Light

As promised the Light came from the east but as illustrated by the Tablets of Divine Plan it now shines on the West:

For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. [Matthew 24:27]

In the ninth Tablet of the Divine Plan 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

The continent of America is in the eyes of the one true God the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide and the free assemble.

He adds:

*They must realize the value of this bounty; because they have obtained such a favor and in order to render thanksgiving for this most great bestowal, they must arise in the diffusion of divine fragrances so that the blessed verse of the Qur'án, "God is the light of heaven and earth: the similitude of His light is a niche in a wall, wherein a lamp is placed, and the lamp enclosed in a case of glass; the glass appears as if it were a shining star. It is lighted with the oil of a Blessed Tree, an olive neither of the East, nor of the West; it wanteth little but that the oil thereof would give light, although no fire touched it. This is the light added unto light. God will direct unto His light whom He pleaseth."*⁴³

Unity is Light, and hatred, animosity and warfare is darkness. In this Day the Light of Divine Guidance is focused on creation of unity

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements ... Turn your faces from the darkness of estrangement to the effulgent light of the daystar of unity ... Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. [TU]

... we must strive with heart and soul in order that this darkness of the contingent world may be dispelled, that the lights of the Kingdom shall shine upon all the horizons, the world of humanity become illumined, the image of God become apparent in human mirrors, the law of God be well established and that all regions of the world shall enjoy peace, comfort and composure beneath the equitable protection of God. My admonition and exhortation to you is this: Be kind to all people, love humanity, consider all mankind as your relations and servants of the most high God. Strive day and night that animosity and contention may pass away from the hearts of men, that all religions shall become reconciled and the nations love each other, so that no racial, religious or political prejudice may remain and the world of humanity behold God as the beginning and end of all existence. God has created all and all return to God. Therefore love humanity with all your heart and soul. [FWU]

Conferring 'life' and 'light' to the world

Christ declared that His disciples must bestow "life" and "light" to the world:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven". [Matthew 5:13-16]

Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." [John 8:12]

In the third Tablet to the Bahá'ís of United States and Canada (#8 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá supplicates God:

Extinguish this fire, so that these dense clouds which obscure the horizon may be scattered, the Sun of Reality shine forth with the rays of conciliation, this intense gloom be dispelled and the resplendent light of peace shed its radiance upon all countries.

O Lord! Draw up the people from the abyss of the ocean of hatred and enmity, and deliver them from this impenetrable darkness. Unite their hearts, and brighten their eyes with the light of peace and reconciliation. Deliver them from the depths of war and bloodshed, and free them from the darkness of error. Remove the veil from their eyes, and enlighten their hearts with the light of guidance. Treat them with Thy tender mercy and compassion, and deal not with them according to Thy justice and wrath which cause the limbs of the mighty to quake.

He describes the "extraordinary capacity" that people will have to "hearken to the Divine Teachings" after having experienced World War I. This reminds us of the readiness today that the world has to listen Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on religious unity after experiencing recurrent acts of violence in the name of religion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes that the conflicts

had become “world-consuming” but that “the rays of peace are world-enlightening”:

One is death, the other is life; this is extinction, that is immortality; one is the most great calamity, the other is the most great bounty; this is darkness, that is light; this is eternal humiliation and that is everlasting glory; one is the destroyer of the foundation of man, the other is the founder of the prosperity of the human race.

... in a short space of time, (through travel-teaching) most wonderful results will be produced, the banner of universal peace will be waving on the apex of the world and the lights of the oneness of the world of humanity may illumine the universe

In the Tablet to the Western States (#4 of 14) He writes:

They must play the melody of international conciliation with such power that every deaf one may attain hearing, every extinct person may be set aglow, every dead one may obtain new life and every indifferent soul may find every extinct person may be set aglow, every dead one may obtain new life and every indifferent soul may find ecstasy.

Whilst in America seven years earlier ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was heard to remark:

May this American democracy... be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the standard of the ‘Most Great Peace’... The American people are indeed worthy of being the first to build the tabernacle of the great peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind... May America become the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment and all the world receive this

heavenly blessing. For America has developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations... May the inhabitants of this country become like angels of heaven with faces turned continually toward God. May all of them become servants of the omnipotent One. May they rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world... This American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people... The American continent gives signs and evidences of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually. [WOB 75-76]

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Western States (#4 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

God says in the great Qur'án: "Verily God is the helper of those who have believed. He will lead them from darkness into light." This means: God loves the believers, consequently He will deliver them from darkness and bring them into the world of light.

The verse of the Qur'án to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers is as follows and contains a warning for those who reject Faith:

God is the Protector (patron) of those who have faith: He brings them out of darkness into the light. Of those who reject faith the patrons are the Evil Ones: from light they will lead them forth into the depths of darkness: they shall be given over to the fire: they shall abide therein for ever.⁴⁴

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of Canada and Greenland (#5 of 14) He refers to another related verse of the Qur'án:

God says in the great Qur'án: A day will come wherein the lights of unity will enlighten all the world. "The earth will be irradiated with the light of its Lord." In other words, the earth will become illumined with the light of God. That light is the light of unity. "There is no God but God."

*And the earth shall shine with the light of her Lord, and the Book shall be set, and the prophets shall be brought up, and the witnesses; and judgment shall be given between them with equity; and none shall be wronged.*⁴⁵

Theme six: The apostles of Christ proclaimed the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God ('the Father') – His kingdom has come

Therefore, each individual Bahá'í residing in North America must now aspire to become a herald of Bahá'u'lláh's kingdom in these vast and spacious lands

In a prayer to be recited by "whoever sets on a teaching journey to any place" in the second general Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (#7 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes a Bahá'í who has arisen to proclaim the Divine "Word" and the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as a "herald of the Kingdom":

O God, my God! Thou seest me enraptured and attracted toward Thy glorious kingdom, enkindled with the fire of Thy love amongst mankind, a herald of Thy kingdom in these vast and spacious lands, severed from aught else save Thee, relying on Thee, abandoning rest and comfort, remote from my native home, a wanderer in these regions, a stranger fallen upon the ground, humble before Thine exalted threshold, submissive toward the heaven of Thine omnipotent glory, supplicating Thee in the dead of night and at the break of dawn, entreating

and invoking Thee at morn and at eventide to graciously aid me to serve Thy Cause, to spread abroad Thy teachings and to exalt Thy Word throughout the East and the West.

Bahá'u'lláh describes to a Muslim cleric the fact that one of the greatest Prophets of the Bible gave the good news of His Day, the coming of the Lord God and the descent of the 'City of God' from heaven:

O Shaykh! Peruse that which Isaiah hath spoken in His Book. He saith: 'Get thee up into the high mountain, O Zion, that bringest good tidings; lift up thy voice with strength, O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings. Lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah: "Behold your God! Behold the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him."'" This Day all the signs have appeared. A Great City hath descended from heaven, and Zion trembleth and exulteth with joy at the Revelation of God, for it hath heard the Voice of God on every side." [ESW 144-145]

For more than two thousand years now the Christians have prayed for the advent of the Kingdom of God:

... Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

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

Give us this day our daily bread. [Matthew 6:9-11]

Travel-teaching – Bahá'ís must follow the example the Disciples of Christ who sacrificed themselves in distant lands to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom⁴⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá paraphrases Mark 16:15 four times in the fourteen Tablets, indicating quite clearly the critical importance of travel teaching in the charter:

(a) Tablet to the Northeastern States (#1):

It is stated in the blessed Gospel: Travel ye toward the East and toward the West and enlighten the people with the light of the Most Great Guidance. so that they may take a portion and share of eternal life.

(b) Tablet to the Southern States (#2):

It is also mentioned in the Gospel: Travel ye to all part of the world and give ye the glad tidings of the appearance of the Kingdom of God.

(c) Tablet to the Western States (#4):

It is also recorded in the blessed Gospel: Travel ye throughout the world and call ye the people to the Kingdom of God

(d) In the second Tablet to the United States and Canada (#6 of 14):

His Holiness Christ says: Travel ye to the East and to the West of the world and summon the people to the Kingdom of God.

The Biblical quotation is:

*He (Jesus) said to them (His disciples), “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all.”*⁴⁷

This instruction is also in the Gospel of Luke:

... proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God [Luke 9:60]

In a similar vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the third Tablet to the United States and Canada (#7 of 14) states:

Therefore with hearts overflowing with the love of God, with tongues commemorating the mention of God, with eyes turned to the Kingdom of God, they must deliver the glad tidings of the manifestation of the Lord of Hosts to all the people.

Travel teaching is also the mandate of the other two charters of the Faith. In the Tablet of Carmel Bahá'u'lláh expresses the following wish that motivates and mandates His followers to arise and proclaim His Faith throughout the world:

... Oh, how I long to announce unto every spot on the surface of the earth, and to carry to each one of its cities, the glad-tidings of this Revelation ...

'Abdu'l-Bahá exhorts the friends also in His Will and Testament to emulate the Disciples of Christ (*Haváriyyún-i-Haḍrat-i-Massih*):

... ye that stand fast in the Covenant! When the hour cometh that this wronged and broken-winged bird will have taken its flight into the Celestial Concourse..., it is incumbent upon ... all the friends and loved ones, one and all to bestir themselves and arise with heart and soul and in one accord, to diffuse the sweet savors of God, to teach His Cause and to promote His Faith. It behooveth them not to rest for a moment, neither to seek repose. They must disperse themselves in every land, pass by every clime, and travel throughout all regions... must kindle the flame of Divine love in every assembly; that the light of truth may rise resplendent in the midmost heart of the world, that throughout the

East and throughout the West a vast concourse may gather under the shadow of the Word of God ...

In these days, the most important of all things is the guidance of the nations and peoples of the world. Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is the head corner-stone of the foundation itself. This wronged servant has spent his days and nights in promoting the Cause and urging the peoples to service. He rested not a moment, till the fame of the Cause of God was noised abroad in the world and the celestial strains from the Abhá Kingdom roused the East and the West. The beloved of God must also follow the same example. This is the secret of faithfulness, this is the requirement of servitude to the Threshold of Bahá!

The disciples of Christ forgot themselves and all earthly things, forsook all their cares and belongings, purged themselves of self and passion and with absolute detachment scattered far and wide and engaged in calling the peoples of the world to the Divine Guidance, till at last they made the world another world, illumined the surface of the earth and even to their last hour proved self-sacrificing in the pathway of that Beloved One of God. Finally in various lands they suffered glorious martyrdom. Let them that are men of action follow in their footsteps!

Theme seven: The power of one individual to influence the course of religious history

As farmers we must plant the seed in a rich soil – the Divine showers will bless the effort with an abundant harvest

In the second Tablet of Divine Plan addressed to the Southern States ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

A person declaring the glad tidings of the appearance of the realities and significances of the Kingdom is like unto a farmer who scatters pure seeds in the rich soil. The spring cloud will pour upon them the rain of bounty, and unquestionably the station of the farmer will be raised in the estimation of the lord of the village, and many harvests will be gathered.

Our duty is to teach at least one soul

In the Tablet addressed to the Bahá'ís of Northeastern States (#1 of 14) He quotes the Qur'án to highlight the potentially manifold consequences of the action of one believer who arises to serve his Lord.

During the lifetime of Jesus Christ the believing, firm souls were few and numbered, but the heavenly blessings descended so plentifully that in a number of years countless souls entered beneath the shadow of the Gospel. God has said in the Qur'án⁴⁸: "One grain will bring forth seven sheaves, and every sheaf shall contain one hundred grains." In other words, one grain will become seven hundred; and if God so wills He will double these also. It has often happened that one blessed soul has become the cause of the guidance of a nation. Now we must not consider our ability and capacity, nay, rather, we must fix our gaze upon the favors and bounties of God, in these days, Who has made of the drop a sea, and of the atom a sun.

In the Tablet to the Southern States (#2 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

... a person become the cause of the illumination of one soul, it is better than a boundless treasury... If God guide, through thee, one soul, it is better for thee than all the riches!

On another occasion ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*... one sanctified soul will become the cause of quickening of a hundred thousand souls... for the guidance of one soul is greater than the sovereignty of a kingdom.*⁴⁹

Shoghi Effendi reinforces this point by quoting the above passage in *The Advent of Divine Justice*. He concludes:

It has often happened that one blessed soul has become the cause of the guidance of a nation. [ADJ 57]

In a similar vein he writes elsewhere:

Just one mature soul, with spiritual understanding and a profound knowledge of the Faith, can set a whole country ablaze — so great is the power of the Cause to work through a pure and selfless channel. [CC2 223]

One soul can be the cause of the spiritual illumination of a continent. [CC2 20]

In addition to its literal meaning, the following blessed verse of the Qur’án is imbued with a similar spiritual understanding:

*... whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.*⁵⁰

This is attested to by Bahá’u’lláh:

Whosoever quickens one soul in this Cause is like unto one quickening all the servants. [BWF 204]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá illustrates this point in the Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the Southern States (#10 of 14) by referring to the sacrificial efforts of Bartholomew who opened up a whole country to the Faith of Christ:

Nearly two thousand years ago, Armenia⁵¹ was enveloped with impenetrable darkness. One blessed soul from among the disciples of Christ hastened to that part, and through his effort, ere long that province became illumined. Thus it has become evident how the power of the Kingdom works!

The power of the faith of the first guide ... become manifest in the lives of other believers, until one sanctified soul will become the cause of quickening a hundred thousand souls.⁵²

Undeterred by fewness of numbers

In the thirteenth Tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

O ye believers of God! Be not concerned with the smallness of your numbers, neither be oppressed by the multitude of an unbelieving world. Five grains of wheat will be endued with heavenly blessing, whereas a thousand tons of tares will yield no results or effect. One fruitful tree will be conducive to the life of society, whereas a thousand forests of wild trees offer no fruits. The plain is covered with pebbles, but precious stones are rare. One pearl is better than a thousand wildernesses of sand, especially this pearl of great price, which is endowed with divine blessing. Ere long thousands of other pearls will be born from it. When that pearl associates and becomes the intimate of the pebbles, they also all change into pearls.

The 'Parable of the Sower'

'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates this vital understanding in His Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Central States (#11 of 14):

The sons and daughters of the kingdom are like unto the real farmers. Through whichever state or country they

pass they display self-sacrifice and sow divine seeds. From that seed harvests are produced. On this subject it is revealed in the glorious Gospel: When the pure seeds are scattered in the good ground heavenly blessing and benediction is obtained.

This is a reference to a parable of Christ given in the Gospel of Matthew. In this parable Christ had explained that His disciples should plant the seed and not be over-concerned with the results. He compares the Word of God and the Divine teachings to seeds that are scattered by a farmer. Some are not appreciated because of shallowness of belief, lack of preparedness, and mundane concerns. Others encounter opposition. But some are appreciated by understanding hearts and yield abundant fruit according to the receptivity of the individuals:

Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:

And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear ...

But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also

*beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold,
some sixty, some thirty.* [Matthew 13:1-23]

Theme eight: ‘The mystery of reversal’ or ‘*sirru’-t-tanqís*’

At the beginning of every Dispensation certain human beings are exalted whilst others are debased. Lowly believers embrace the Faith and embody its spiritual principles, and undertake the arduous task of proclaiming its Truths. Conversely, others including some spiritual leaders are demeaned by their blindness, and lack of receptivity and response to the Message. Shaykh Aḥmad-i-Aḥsá’í, who heralded the advent of the Faith of the Báb”, prophesied that at the appearance of the Promised One all things would be reversed, the last would be first, the first last.

Bahá’u’lláh in one of His Tablets refers to the “symbol and allusion” of the “mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign”. He states: “Through this reversal He hath caused the exalted to be abased and the abased to be exalted”, and He recalls that “in the days of Jesus, it was those who were distinguished for their learning, the men of letters and religion, who denied Him, whilst humble fishermen made haste to gain admittance into the Kingdom.” [KA note #171]

Hence, to encourage individual Bahá’ís to arise and not to be overwhelmed by any consideration of their limitations and the magnitude of the task before them, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quotes from the Gospels and the Qur’án in the final Tablet addressed to the entire community of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada (#14 of 14) that speaks to this principle.

Matthew 5 contains nine ‘Beatitudes’, the first one of which reads:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

In other words: Blessed are the nameless and traceless poor, for they are the leaders of mankind.

Likewise it is said in the Qur’án: “And We desire to show favor to those who were brought low in the land, and to make them spiritual leaders among men, and to make of them Our heirs.”⁵³ Or, we wish to grant a favor to the impotent souls and suffer them to become the inheritors of the Messengers and Prophets.

Notably, later in the Gospel Christ adds:

So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen. [Matthew 20:16]

In the same Tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides examples of this and refers to two dedicated female followers of Christ who fulfilled valuable functions in early days by promoting the Faith of Christ and supporting His disciples.

Consider! The station and the confirmation of the apostles in the time of Christ was not known, and no one looked on them with the feeling of importance – nay, rather, they persecuted and ridiculed them. Later on it became evident what crowns studded with the brilliant jewels of guidance were placed on the heads of the apostles, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of John.

In the Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the Western States (#12 of 14) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reveals the following prayer for those engaged in teaching:

O Lord! I am single, alone and lowly. For me there is no support save Thee, no helper except Thee and no sustainer beside Thee. Confirm me in Thy service, assist me with the cohorts of Thine angels, make me victorious in the promotion of Thy Word and suffer me to speak out Thy wisdom amongst Thy creatures. Verily, Thou art the helper of the weak and the defender of the little ones, and verily Thou art the Powerful, the Mighty and the Unconstrained.

Theme nine: Encouragement tinged with admonishment

The addresses to the American community are replete with encouragement, as exemplified by the following statement in the second Tablet to the entire Bahá'í community of the United States and Canada (#7 of 14):

The full measure of your success is as yet unrevealed, its significance still unapprehended. Ere long ye will, with your own eyes, witness how brilliantly every one of you, even as a shining star, will radiate in the firmament of your country the light of divine Guidance, and will bestow upon its people the glory of an everlasting life... The range of your future achievements still remains undisclosed. I fervently hope that in the near future the whole earth may be stirred and shaken by the results of your achievements.

And again, in the third Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (#8 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

O ye Apostles of Bahá'u'lláh!

May my life be sacrificed for you! ...

Behold the portals which Bahá'u'lláh hath opened before you! Consider how exalted and lofty is the station you

*are destined to attain; how unique the favors with which you have been endowed.*⁵⁴

Shoghi Effendi expresses the same confidence in the American community:

Such vacillation, failure, or neglect, the American believers, the ambassadors of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, will, I am firmly convinced, never permit. Such a trust will never be betrayed, such hopes can never be shattered, such a privilege will never be forfeited, nor will such praises remain unuttered. Nay rather the present generation of this blessed, this repeatedly blessed, community will go from strength to strength, and will hand on, as the first century draws to a close, to the generations that must succeed it in the second the torch of Divine Guidance, undimmed by the tempestuous winds that must blow upon it, that they in turn, faithful to the wish and mandate of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, may carry that torch, with that self-same vigor, fidelity, and enthusiasm, to the darkest and remotest corners of the earth. [ADJ 74-75]

There are, however, a couple of instances where the letters exhibit impatience concerning the slow pace of progress. In the Tablet to the Bahá'is of Canada and Greenland (#5 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

Although in most of the states and cities of the United States, praise be to God, His fragrances are diffused, and souls unnumbered are turning their faces and advancing toward the Kingdom of God, yet in some of the states the Standard of Unity is not yet upraised as it should be, nor are the mysteries of the Holy Books, such as the Bible, the Gospel, and the Qur'án, unraveled.

In the Tablet to the Southern States (#10 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks:

It is about twenty-three years that the fragrances of God have been diffused in America, but no adequate and befitting motion has been realized, and no great acclamation and acceleration has been witnessed. Now it is my hope that through the heavenly power, the fragrances of the Merciful, the attraction of consciousness, the celestial outpourings, the heavenly cohorts and the gushing forth of the fountain of divine love, the believers of God may arise and in a short time the greatest good may unveil her countenance, the Sun of Reality may shine forth with such intensity that the darkness of the world of nature may become entirely dispelled and driven away...

Again, in the Tablet to the Central States (#3 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks:

So far the summons of the Kingdom of God and the proclamation of the oneness of the world of humanity has not been made in these states systematically and enthusiastically. Blessed souls and detached teachers have not traveled through these parts repeatedly; therefore these states are still in a state of heedlessness.

Again, in the Tablet to the Western States (#4 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks:

... the lamp of the love of God is not ignited in a befitting and behooving manner, and the call of the Kingdom of God has not been raised. Now, if it is possible, show ye an effort in this direction. Either travel yourselves, personally, throughout those states or choose others and send them, so that they may teach the souls.

Additionally, there are some implicit admonishments. In Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Western States (#12 of 14), after

praising the beauty of the land and climate of the region, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

... Particularly was I greatly pleased with the meetings in San Francisco and Oakland, the gatherings in Los Angeles, and the believers who came from the cities of other states. Whenever their faces cross My memory, immediately infinite happiness is realized.

Therefore I hope that the divine teachings like unto the rays of the sun may be diffused in all the Western States, and the blessed verse of the Qur’án, “It is a good City and the Lord is the Forgiver!” may become realized.

The “good City” (*balad*; also country, region) is a reference in the Qur’án to a region in Yemen occupied by a tribe ‘*Shebá*’ or *Sabá*, which was characterized by pure air and good fortune.

*There was indeed a sign for Sheba in their dwelling-place: Two gardens on the right hand and one to the left: eat of the provision of your Lord and render thanks to Him. A good (fair) land (balad; also city or country) and a forgiving Lord!*⁵⁵

It is noteworthy that the next two verses carry an implicit warning. Despite the great prosperity bestowed upon them, the inhabitants of *Shebá* turned away from God and were consequently punished by an environmental disaster:

But they turned away. So we sent the flood of Arim (burst dam) upon them and exchanged their two gardens for two gardens bearing bitter fruit ...

*Thus did We recompense them for having disbelieved. And do We recompense any but the disbelievers?*⁵⁶

However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá merely emphasizes the current good fortune of California and neighboring states and the indulgence of their Lord.

The next verse of the Qur'án that 'Abdu'l-Bahá quotes may also contains a similar admonition:

*Likewise, the significance of another Qur'anic verse,
“Do ye not travel through the land?”*

There are several verses in the Qur'án with the phrase “do ye not travel through the land?” or “have they not journeyed (traveled) upon the earth”. All relate to the adverse outcomes of earlier civilizations that were heedless of Divine Mercy:

Do they not travel through the earth and see what was the end of those before them? They were more numerous than these and superior in strength and in the traces (they have left) in the land: yet all that they accomplished was of no profit to them.

For when their apostles came to them with Clear Signs, they exulted in such knowledge (and skill) as they had; but that very (wrath) at which they were wont to scoff hemmed them in.

But when they saw Our Punishment, they said: “We believe in God, — The One God — and we reject the partners we used to join with Him.”

But their professing the Faith when they (actually) saw Our punishment was not going to profit them. (Such has been) God's way of dealing with His servants (from the most ancient times). And even thus did the rejecters of God perish (utterly).⁶⁷

Have they not journeyed upon the earth and observed how those before them fared in the end? They were greater than them in strength. They tilled the earth and built upon it more than have they, and their Messengers brought them clear proofs. For God would never wrong them, but themselves did they wrong.

Then the end of those who committed evil deeds was most evil, for they denied God's signs and mocked them.

God originates creation, then brings it back, then unto Him shall ye be returned.

*And on the Day when the Hour is come, the guilty shall despair.*⁵⁸

O ye who believe! If ye will aid (the cause of) God, He will aid you, and plant your feet firmly. But those who reject (God), for them is destruction, and (God) will render their deeds astray (from their mark).

That is because they hate the Revelation of God; so He has made their deeds fruitless.

Do they not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them (who did evil)? God brought utter destruction on them, and similar (fates await) those who reject God.

*That is because God is the Protector of those who believe, but those who reject God have no protector.*⁵⁹

*Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts.*⁶⁰

*Nor did We send before thee (as apostles) any but men, whom We did inspire, — (men) living in human habitations. Do they not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? But the home of the Hereafter is best, for those who do right. Will ye not then understand?*⁶¹

Do they not travel through the earth, and see. What was the end of those before them, though they were superior to them in strength? Nor is God to be frustrated by

anything whatever in the heavens or on earth: for He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful.

*If God were to punish men according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the surface of the (earth) a single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, verily God has in His sight all His servants.*⁶²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then returns to the heartwarming good news of God’s ability to transform the individual and society if they arise to act as His instruments and His counsels:

... and of the verse, “Behold the traces of the Mercy of God!” become revealed in the utmost effulgence.

This is a reference to the following verse of the Qur’án:

*Look, therefore, at the prints (traces, marks, vestiges, evidences) of God’s mercy (in creation): how He quickeneth the earth after her death. Lo! He verily is the Quickener of the dead, and He is Able to do all things.*⁶³

Theme ten: Bahá’ís must study the Bible and the Qur’án

They must “propagate the holy teachings revealed in the sacred books through the divine inspiration.”

Our Writings including the Tablets of the Divine Plan provide several reasons why Bahá’ís in North America are urged to study the Bible and the Qur’án.

Belief in Islám (Muḥammad and the Qur'án) and Christianity is essential to being a follower of Bahá'u'lláh – it defines a Bahá'í

Indeed, the essential prerequisites of admittance into the Bahá'í fold of Jews, Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, and the followers of other ancient faiths, as well as of agnostics and even atheists, is the wholehearted and unqualified acceptance by them all of the divine origin of both Islám and Christianity, of the Prophetic functions of both Muḥammad and Jesus Christ... [PDC 110]

“An essential preliminary” to teaching

We are far more effective in teaching Christians and Muslims if they determine that we truly believe in their religions and consider their scriptures part of our own. Study of the Bible and the Qur'án is thus critical to our mission to promote the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and thereby create the unity of mankind and the reconciliation of the antagonistic religions. Notably, Bahá'u'lláh at the beginning of the Kitáb-i-Íqán states that we should “consider the past” [KI 4]. The originally phrase, “*názer be ayyam Qabl shavid*,” translates “observe the ‘days’ of past dispensations . These dispensations are best considered in the context of their scriptures and teachings as exemplified by the following statement of Bahá'u'lláh in His Book of the Covenant: “Consider ye and call to mind that which the All-Merciful hath revealed in the Qur'án” [Kitáb-i-Ahd 1]. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá also admonished us to “consider the past (dispensations)” [BWF 394]. The Tablets of the Divine Plan affirm our unequivocal belief in Judeo-Christianity and Islám, and reignite our determination to study their scriptures. It is worth noting that Marcus Bach, a Christian to whom Shoghi Effendi presented the Bahá'í Faith, was left in no doubt about the Guardian's love for Christ:

But the thing that struck me most as our meeting progressed was his unquestioned devotion to the Galilean (Jesus).⁶⁴

Central to our appreciation of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh

The Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi often refer to the Bible and the Qur'án in their Writings. Study of the Bible and of the Qur'án therefore increases the understanding of our faith. Shoghi Effendi placed special emphasis on the study of the Bible and the Qur'án in The Advent of Divine Justice, an indispensable letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America in 1938, setting out the spiritual prerequisites for success in every activity directed at advancing the Faith.

Those who participate in such a campaign, whether in an organizing capacity, or as workers to whose care the execution of the task itself has been committed, must, as an essential preliminary to the discharge of their duties, thoroughly familiarize themselves with the various aspects of the history and teachings of their Faith... They must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islám — the source and background of their Faith — and approach reverently and with a mind purged from preconceived ideas the study of the Qur'án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God. [ADJ 49]

Shoghi Effendi urged us to make the necessary effort:

... the Guardian would certainly advise, and even urge the friends to make a thorough study of the Qur'án, as the knowledge of this sacred Scripture is absolutely indispensable for every believer who wishes to adequately understand and intelligently read, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh... [DG 63]

With regard to the school's program (Louhelen) for the next summer; the Guardian would certainly advise, and even urge the friends to make a thorough study of the Qur'án, as the knowledge of this sacred Scripture is absolutely indispensable for every believer who wishes to adequately understand and intelligently read, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. Although there are very few persons among Western Bahá'ís who are capable of handling such a course in a scholarly way, the mere lack of such competent teachers should encourage and stimulate the believers to get better acquainted with the Sacred Scriptures of Islám. In this way, there will gradually appear some distinguished Bahá'ís who will be so well versed in the teachings of Islám as to be able to guide the believers in their study of that religion. [DG 63]

As regards the [Summer School] courses, he would advise you to continue laying emphasis on the history and teachings of Islám, and in particular on the Islamic origins of the Faith.⁶⁵

... We must remember that every religion sprang from some root, and just as Christianity sprang from Judaism, our own religion sprang from Islám, and that is why so many of the teachings deduce their proofs from Islám.⁶⁶

Shoghi Effendi hopes that your lectures will not only serve to deepen the knowledge of the believers in the doctrines and culture of Islám, but will set their hearts

afire with the love of everything that vitally pertains to Muhammad and His Faith. [LG #1664]

All humanity have the capacity to reflect the divine light. We therefore proclaim Bahá'u'lláh's Message to all, and do not direct our teaching efforts merely at like-minded individuals. Our study of the scriptures allows us to address both liberal as well as conservative Christians and Muslims. Otherwise, how could we witness the miraculous ability of the Divine Word to open the eyes and ears, to soften the hearts, and thus transform seemingly more recalcitrant beings? Many Christians and Muslims in North America are very familiar with their scriptures. Therefore, we often have to fortify our presentations with explanations by Bahá'u'lláh of the truths enshrined in the Bible, and the Qur'an. Otherwise, our presentations will not resonate with most Christians and Muslims, and whilst possibly appearing enticing and attractive they will be rejected and resisted on the grounds that they are non-scriptural and dangerously naïve.

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá was writing the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, Europe was waging some of the bloodiest battles of World War I.⁶⁷ There were then only a few thousand Muslims in the United States, mostly migrants from the Ottoman Empire and the Indian subcontinent. It is therefore worth meditating as to why He included in these letters addressed to North America fourteen direct quotations from the Qur'an. One can only conclude that He foresaw the need for the American believers to become familiar with the scripture and prepare themselves for the time when Muslims will become a prominent part of the landscape. Since then Islám has become the fastest growing religion in North America, and an independent research group estimates that in 2015 there were about 3.3 million Muslims of all ages living in the United States, or about 1 per cent of the population, compared to about 71% Christians, and 5.7 million Jews and 2.1 million Hindus.⁶⁸ By 2050, the American Muslim

population is projected to reach 8.1 million people, or 2.1% of the total population.⁶⁹

The resurgence of Islám, the increasing number of Muslims in predominantly Judeo-Christian Western democracies and the unfortunate escalating violence in the name of Islám have added to the urgency of the call to action embodied in the Tablets of Divine Plan. The world-wide evidences of nefarious results of religious fanaticism and hatred also underline the Guardian's urgent and specific exhortations to Bahá'ís almost eight decades ago to familiarize themselves with the Qur'án and Islám.

Essential for our presentations of the scriptural basis of 'One Common Faith' and 'Progressive Revelation' – acceptance of these precepts is critically important for the establishment of unity, our avowed goal

Our stated task is facilitated by the fact that every religion confirms earlier Dispensations and gives the good news that God will in due time reveal further truths. Additionally, the Dispensations of Moses, Christ, Muḥammad, and Bahá'u'lláh share identical eternal spiritual values. Hence, explanations that focus on the rebirth of the essential [PUP 445] ethical and moral teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islám, rather than an emphasis on their clearly outdated social laws and effete traditions, promote organic unity.

In the Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the Northeastern States (#1 of 14) 'Abdu'l-Bahá thus defines the function of the individual:

... man must become the cause of the illumination of the world of humanity and propagate the holy teachings revealed in the sacred books through the divine inspiration.

Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi in The Advent of Divine Justice quotes from the Tablets of Divine Plan, dated April 5,

1916 and addressed to the Bahá'ís of Canada and Greenland (#5 of 14), in which Ábdu'l-Bahá links the lack of hoped-for progress in establishing harmony in several parts of the United States directly with the failure of the North American Bahá'í community to provide the scriptural evidence and basis for the unifying principles of our Faith, such as the Oneness of God, the Oneness of Faith and progressive revelation.

Although in most of the states and cities of the United States, praise be to God, His fragrances are diffused, and souls unnumbered are turning their faces and advancing toward the Kingdom of God, yet in some of the states the Standard of Unity is not yet upraised as it should be, nor are the mysteries of the Holy Books, such as the Bible (the Tanakh), the Gospel, and the Qur'án, unraveled. Through the concerted efforts of all the friends the Standard of Unity must needs be unfurled in those states, and the divine teachings promoted, so that these states may also receive their portion of the heavenly bestowals and a share of the Most Great Guidance. [ADJ 57-58]

It is the duty of Bahá'ís to provide the interpretations and explanations of the 'mysteries' of the Bible and the Qur'án

The Bible discourages Jews and Christians from interpreting the scriptures⁷⁰. Muslims are similarly warned that attempts to explain the abstruse parts of the Qur'án (the *mutashabihát*) that are susceptible to interpretation (*ta'wíl*) is likely to cause divisions.⁷¹ The *ta'wíl* and the explanations (*tafsír*) of the *mutashabihát* are reserved for a future Day of God.⁷² It is therefore the duty of Bahá'ís to provide the scriptural interpretations in the light of the extensive explanations of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. It is of interest that in response to a query of the Hand of the Cause of God, *Ibn-i-Abhar*, as to how he could, confined and chained in

a prison, best teach the Faith, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lovingly advises him to read the Qur’án night and day and to provide its *ta’wíl* and its *tafsír*.⁷³

It is instructional that in the Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada (#6 of 14) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes the importance of teaching the Catholics of Mexico through explanations from the Bible. It is also noteworthy in this context that since then Roman Catholicism has lost influence in Mexico and South America whilst Bible-based evangelical Protestant groups have made significant advances.⁷⁴ One can only speculate the magnitude of the success that American and Canadian Bahá’ís would have enjoyed had they earnestly heeded ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s admonition.

Likewise the republic of Mexico is very important. The majority of the inhabitants of that country are devoted Catholics. They are totally unaware of the reality of the Bible (Old Testament or Tanakh), the Gospel and the new divine teachings. They do not know that the basis of the religions of God is one and that the holy Manifestations are like unto the Sun of Truth, rising from the different dawning-places. Those souls are submerged in the sea of dogmas. If one breath of life be blown over them, great results will issue therefrom. But it is better for those who intend to go to Mexico to teach, to be familiar with the Spanish language.

Additionally, in the context of Judeo-Christianity and Islám, the World Order letters written by Shoghi Effendi (March 28, 1941) state unequivocally as a “fundamental principle of religious truth”, that “declared ... the primary purpose (of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh) is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose” [WOB 58].

At a time when the light of Islám is dimmed by atrocities carried out in its name, it is our duty to defend the spiritual truths of Islám, for while Bahá'u'lláh has unconditionally abrogated the Dispensation of Islám He has not abrogated the Faith or religion of Islám

Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1936:

The truth is that Western historians have for many centuries distorted the facts to suit their religious and ancestral prejudices. The Bahá'ís should try to study history anew, and to base all their investigations first and foremost on the written Scriptures of Islám and Christianity.⁷⁵

It was with feelings of great joy, pride and satisfaction that Shoghi Effendi declared that a Christian Queen⁷⁶ had through her recognition of the Mission of Bahá'u'lláh expressed her belief in the prophetic function of Muḥammad:

... God is All, everything. He is the power behind all beginnings.... His is the Voice within us that shows us good and evil. But mostly we ignore or misunderstand this voice. Therefore, did He choose His Elect to come down amongst us upon earth to make clear His Word, His real meaning. Therefore, the Prophets; therefore, Christ, Muḥammad, Bahá'u'lláh, for man needs from time to time a voice upon earth to bring God to him, to sharpen the realization of the existence of the true God. Those voices sent to us had to become flesh, so that with our earthly ears we should be able to hear and understand. [PDC 109]

Shoghi Effendi considered this expression of faith in Muḥammad by Queen Marie of Romania as a testimony of our dedication to the principle of 'One Common Faith':

What greater proof ... can the (Muslim clergy) ... require wherewith to demonstrate the recognition by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh of the exalted position occupied by the Prophet Muḥammad ... What greater evidence of our competence can they demand than that we should kindle... the spark of an ardent and sincere conversion to the truth voiced by the Apostle of God, and obtain from the pen of royalty this public, and indeed historic, confession of His God-given Mission? [PDC 109]

It would therefore be a grave departure from this essential principles of the Bahá'í Faith for any believer to speak disparagingly of Islám, Muḥammad or the Qur'án:

(let no Muslim) ... think for a moment that either Islám, or its Prophet, or His Book, or His appointed Successors, or any of His authentic teachings, have been, or are to be in any way, or to however slight a degree, disparaged. [PDC 108]

To exemplify the principle of One Common Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about the Faith of the Nazarene in the Synagogues and defended the Prophet of Arabia in Synagogues and Churches. The beloved Guardian writes:

There is so [much] misunderstanding about Islám in the West in general that you have to dispel. Your task is rather difficult and requires a good deal of erudition. Your chief task is to acquaint the friends with the pure teachings of the Prophet as recorded in the Qur'án, and then to point out how these teachings have, throughout succeeding ages, influenced nay guided the course of human development. In other words you have to show the position and significance of Islám in the history of civilization.

The Bahá'í view on that subject is that the Dispensation of Muḥammad, like all other Divine Dispensations, has been fore-ordained, and that as such forms an integral part of the Divine Plan for the spiritual, moral and social development of mankind. It is not an isolated religious phenomenon, but is closely and historically related to the Dispensation of Christ, and those of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It was intended by God to succeed Christianity and it was therefore the duty of the Christians to accept it as firmly as they had adhered to the religion of Christ.

You should also cautiously emphasize the truth that due to the historical order of its appearance, and also because of the obviously more advanced character of its teachings, Islám constitutes a fuller revelation of God's purpose for mankind. The so-called Christian civilization of which the Renaissance is one of the most striking manifestations is essentially Muslim in its origins and foundations. When medieval Europe was plunged in darkest barbarism, the Arabs regenerated and transformed by the spirit released by the religion of Muḥammad, were busily engaged in establishing a civilization the kind of which their contemporary Christians in Europe had never witnessed before. It was eventually through Arabs that civilization was introduced to the West. It was through them that the philosophy, science and culture which the old Greeks had developed found their way to Europe. The Arabs were the ablest translators, and linguists of their age, and it is thanks to them that the writings of such well-known thinkers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were made available to the Westerners. It is wholly unfair to attribute the efflorescence of European culture during the Renaissance period to the influence of Christianity. It was mainly the product of the forces released by the Muhammadan Dispensation. From the standpoint of

institutionalism Islám far surpasses true Christianity as we know it in the Gospels. There are infinitely more laws and institutions in the Qur'án than in the Gospel. While the latter's emphasis is mainly, not to say wholly, on individual and personal conduct, the Qur'án stresses the importance of society. This social emphasis acquires added importance and significance in the Bahá'í Revelation. When carefully and impartially compared, the Qur'án marks a definite advancement on the Gospel, from the standpoint of spiritual and humanitarian progress. The truth is that Western historians have for many centuries distorted the facts to suit their religious and ancestral prejudices. The Bahá'ís should try to study history anew, and to base all their investigations first and foremost on the written Scriptures of Islám and Christianity.⁷⁷

And again,

It is for (Bahá'ís) to try and gradually undermine this prejudicial attitude towards Islám, and to bring to full light the great historical accomplishments which that Faith achieved ... the friends should emphasize the study of Islám and its scripture. They should not depend too much on the Western writers on that subject, but should rather thoroughly investigate themselves, basing their studies first and foremost on the Qur'án, which is absolutely authentic.⁷⁸

The Guardian urged the friends to defend Islám by examining and emphasizing the spiritual fruits, and cultural and scientific achievements of Islám in its early phases. The present tragedy of Islám is largely due to insistence by a clergy on the "non-essential"¹⁵ social laws that, as anticipated in the Qur'án⁷⁹, have been abrogated by Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi wrote in defense of Islám in 1933:

... (Islám) is not only the last of the world religions, but a fuller Revelation than any one preceding it. The Qur'án is not only more authoritative than any previous religious gospel, but it contains also much more ordinances, teachings and precepts, which taken together constitute a fuller Revelation of God's purpose and law to mankind than Christianity, Judaism or any other previous Dispensation. This view is in complete accord with the Bahá'í philosophy of progressive revelation, and should be thoroughly accepted and taught by every loyal Christian Bahá'í.⁸⁰

And again in 1948,

Islám attained a very high spiritual state, but western scholars are prone to judging it by Christian standards. One cannot call one world Faith superior to another, as they all come from God; they are progressive, each suited to certain needs of the times.⁸¹

Beyond defending Judaism, Christianity and Islám, the Bahá'í Faith is vested with the important role of resurrecting and re-animating these religions as anticipated in the Bible and in the Qur'án:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. [John 5:25]

How can ye withhold faith from God? Ye were dead and He gave you life; next He will cause you to die; next He will restore you to life: next shall ye return to Him! [Qur'án 2:238]

Shoghi Effendi explains further:

(The Faith's) avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile

their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer⁸² has graphically expressed it, “are doomed not to die, but to be reborn... ‘Does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child nor youth perishes?’ [WOB 114]

Summary

The Tablets of the Divine Plan mandate the Bahá’ís of North America to arise and, individually and collectively, travel and proclaim the advent of the Kingdom of Bahá’u’lláh. The many references to the Bible and the Qur’án serve to imprint on our minds and souls the Oneness of Faith. We are asked to emulate the zeal and sacrificial endeavors of the disciples of Christ, to undergo a spiritual rebirth, and to become sanctified from mundane attachments. We are assured that the Holy Spirit and the heavenly Hosts will rush to lend their assistance to our efforts. Spiritually transformed and well informed teachers must create unity by explaining the truths of the scriptures and thereby demonstrating the oneness of divine purpose. The creation of religious unity will promote the unity of mankind, which in turn will assure global peace and tranquility.

NOTES

¹ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, September 29, 1977.

² *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:10:

فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَّرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْذِبُونَ

³ *al-Fátihah*, The Opening, 1:1-7:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴿١﴾

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢﴾

الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴿٣﴾

مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ ﴿٤﴾

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ﴿٥﴾

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ﴿٦﴾

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ ﴿٧﴾

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds,

The Beneficent, the Merciful.

Master of the Day of Judgment,

Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help.

Show us the Straight Path (*Sirát almustaqeema*),

The path (*Sirát*) of those whom Thou hast favoured;

Not the (path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.

⁴ Traditionally, '*Sirát*' is interpreted literally and incredibly as a narrow sharp bridge which every person must pass on the Day of Resurrection and the Day of Judgment or '*yawmi alddeen*' to attain paradise. The sinners fall into the fires of hell but the righteous will successfully navigate the bridge and quench their thirst by imbibing from the cool and refreshing waters of '*kawthar*', a river 'of abundance' in paradise. The Church is afflicted by similar literal imagery of a bridge, ladder, or stairway to heaven.

⁵ *Há-mím* (Abbreviated Letters), or *Fuṣṣilat*, Expounded or 41:30:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَمُوا تَتَنَزَّلُ
عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا بِالْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي
كُنْتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

⁶ *Suratu'l Nus'h*: Provisional Translation This is *Suratu'l-Nus'h* (Admonition or Exhortation). For those who want to heed God's admonitions. Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for Siyyid Ja'far-i-Yazdí, Provisional Translation by Afaf A. Stevens.

⁷ *al-An'ám*, The Cattle, 6:39:

وَالَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا صُمُّوا وَبُكْمٌ فِي الظُّلُمَاتِ ۚ
يَسْأَلُ اللَّهُ يُضِلُّهُ وَمَنْ يَشَاءُ يَجْعَلْهُ عَلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ
مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٣٩﴾

⁸ *Ál-i-Imrán*, or The Family of *Imrán*, 3:194:

رَبَّنَا وَءَاتِنَا مَا وَعَدْتَنَا عَلَىٰ رُسْلِكَ وَلَا تُخْزِنَا يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ ۚ إِنَّكَ لَا تُخْلِفُ
الْعَهْدَ ﴿١٩٤﴾

“Our Lord! Grant us what Thou didst promise unto us through Thine Apostles, and save us from shame on the Day of Judgment: For Thou never breakest Thy promise.”

⁹ *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:256:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ ۚ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ
وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدْ اسْتَمْسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا انْفِصَامَ لَهَا ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ
عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٥٦﴾

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error: whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things.

¹⁰ *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:212-213:

رُيِّنَ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا وَيَسْخَرُونَ مِنَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا
وَالَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا فَوْقَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ
﴿٢١٢﴾

كَانَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ النَّبِيِّينَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ وَأَنْزَلَ
مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ فِي مَا اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ وَمَا
اخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ أُوتُوهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ الْبَيِّنَاتُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ^ط
فَهَدَى اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لِمَا اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ مِنَ الْحَقِّ بِإِذْنِهِ^ط وَاللَّهُ يَهْدِي
مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿١٣﴾

¹¹ *Al-i-'Imrân*, The Family of *Imrân*, 3:74:

يَخْتَصُ بِرَحْمَتِهِ^ط مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ ذُو الْفَضْلِ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٤﴾

¹² *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:105:

مَا يَوَدُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ وَلَا الْمُشْرِكِينَ أَنْ يُنَزَّلَ عَلَيْكُمْ
مِنْ خَيْرٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ^ط وَاللَّهُ يَخْتَصُ بِرَحْمَتِهِ^ط مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ ذُو الْفَضْلِ
الْعَظِيمِ ﴿١٠٥﴾

¹³ Tanakh is referred to as Old Testament by Christians. It is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter of *Torah* ("Teachings"), *Nevi'im* ("Prophets") and *Ketuvim* ("Writings").

¹⁴ *Zukhruf*, Gold Ornaments, 43:22-23:

بَلْ قَالُوا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ آثَرِهِمْ مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾
وَكَذَلِكَ مَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّنْ ذِّكْرِ إِلَّا قَالَ
مُتْرَفُوهَا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ آثَرِهِمْ مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Nay, They say, "we found our father following a creed, and surely we are rightly guided in their footsteps".

Likewise, "We sent no Warner before thee to any people, but the wealthy ones among them said: "We found our fathers following a certain religion, and we will certainly follow in their footsteps."

Also, *Hud* 11:9:

فَلَا تَكُ فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِّمَّا يَعْْبُدُونَ هَؤُلَاءِ مَا يَعْْبُدُونَ إِلَّا كَمَا يَعْبُدُ آبَاؤُهُمْ مِّنْ قَبْلُ

Be not then in doubt as to what these men worship.

They worship nothing but what their fathers worshipped ...

¹⁵ *al-'Ankabút, The Spider, 29:69:*

¹⁶ *Baní-Ísrá-il, The Children of Israel, 17:36:*

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَٰئِكَ
كَانَ عَنْهُ مُسَوِّدًا ﴿٦٦﴾

¹⁷ *al-Hujurát, The Private Apartments, 49:6:*

يَتَّخِذُهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِنْ جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَنْ تُصِيبُوا
قَوْمًا بِجَهْلَةٍ فَتُصْحَبُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَادِمِينَ ﴿٦١﴾

¹⁸ *Tá-Há, 20:114:*

زِدْنِي عِلْمًا رَبِّ

¹⁹ *al-Baqarah, The Cow, 2:282:*

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَبُوعَلِّمُكُمُ اللَّهُ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

²⁰ *al-Zumar, The Crowds, 39:9:*

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

²¹ Note the similarity of 'One' in the Hebrew (Echad) and the Arabic (Ahad).

²² Deuteronomy 6:4: Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad

²³ *al-Ikhlás, Sincerity, 112:1:*

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ﴿١﴾

Qul huwa Allahu aḥadun

²⁴ *Maryam, Mary, 19:36:*

وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ فَأَعْبُدُوا هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦٦﴾

²⁵ John 5:39-47:

Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.

And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

I receive not honour from men.

But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.

I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.

How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.

For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me.

But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

- ²⁶ Those that unnecessarily multiply entities or concepts such as God (those that make distinctions between religions or the Godhead such as Trinitarians).

- ²⁷ *Shúrá*, 42:13:

شَرَعَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّى بِهِ نُوحًا وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى وَعِيسَى أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ كَبُرَ عَلَى الْمُشْرِكِينَ مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ اللَّهُ يَجْتَبِي إِلَيْهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي إِلَيْهِ مَنْ يُنِيبُ

- ²⁸ *al-Baqarah*, the Cow, 2:213:

كَانَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ النَّبِيِّينَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ وَأَنْزَلَ مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ فِيمَا اٰخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ وَمَا اٰخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ أُوتُوهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ الْبَيِّنَاتُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ فَهَدَى اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لِمَا اٰخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ مِنْ الْحَقِّ بِإِذْنِهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَهْدِي مَن يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٢١٣﴾

- ²⁹ *al-Mulk*, Sovereignty, 67:3:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا مَّا تَرَى فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِنْ تَفَوتٍ ۗ فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَى مِنْ فُطُورٍ ﴿٣﴾

- ³⁰ Name and subject of the 78th Súrah of the Qur'an, *al-Naba*, The Tiding or Great News.

- ³¹ *al-Insán*, Man, 76:29:

إِنْ هَذِهِ تَذِكْرَةٌ فَمَنْ شَاءَ اتَّخَذْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِ سَبِيلًا ﴿٢٩﴾

³² Revelation 21:6: "I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely."

³³ The counterpart of *Israfil* is the angel Raphael (Hebrew, 'God Heals') in Judeo-Christianity. In Islamic tradition the angel *Israfil* will blow the trumpet announcing the coming of the Day of Resurrection.

³⁴ 'The Epistle of Mathetius to Diognetus', describing Christians in 2nd century AD.

³⁵ *Ál-i-Imrán*, The Family of *Imrán*, 3:103:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ
كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى
شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

³⁶ From a letter on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, April 18, 1941. *Lights of Guidance*, #1604.

³⁷ *al-Baqarah*, The Cow 2:87 and 2:253; and *al-Má'idah*, The Table Spread, 5:110.

³⁸ *al-Má'idah*, 5:110 and *al-Nahl*, 16:102.

³⁹ ESW 21: "Verily we shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and Thy pen."

⁴⁰ *al-Hajj*, The Pilgrimage, 22:5:

وَنَرَى الْأَرْضَ هَامِدَةً فَإِذَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ وَأَنْبَتَتْ مِنْ كُلِّ رَوْحٍ بِهِيجٍ

⁴¹ *Ibráhím*, or Abraham, 14:24-27:

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً
كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ ﴿٢٤﴾

تُؤْتِي أَكْثَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَمَثَلُ كَلِمَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ كَشَجَرَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ اجْتُثَّتْ مِنْ فَوْقِ الْأَرْضِ مَا لَهَا مِنْ
قَرَارٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

يُثَبِّتُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِالْقَوْلِ الثَّابِتِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ
الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ وَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ الظَّالِمِينَ وَيَفْعَلُ اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ



⁴² *al-Muddaththir*, The Covered One, 74:31:

وَمَا جَعَلْنَا أَصْحَابَ النَّارِ إِلَّا مَلَائِكَةً وَمَا جَعَلْنَا عِدَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا فِتْنَةً لِلَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوا لِيَسْتَيَقِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ وَيَرْذَاذَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِبْرِيْمَا وَلَا
يَرْتَابَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَلَيَقُولَ الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ
مَرَضٌ وَالْكَافِرُونَ مَاذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِهَذَا مَثَلًا كَذَلِكَ يُضِلُّ اللَّهُ مَن يَشَاءُ
وَيَهْدِي مَن يَشَاءُ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ جُنُودَ رَبِّكَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَمَا هِيَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِلْبَشَرِ



⁴³ *al-Núr*, Light, 24:35:

﴿اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ
الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ
مُبَرَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ
لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُّورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ
اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَلَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

⁴⁴ *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:257:

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ
وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَوْلِيَاؤُهُمُ الظُّلُمَاتُ يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ النُّورِ إِلَى
الظُّلُمَاتِ أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ



⁴⁵ *al-Zumar*, The Troops, 39:69:

وَأَشْرَقَتِ الْأَرْضُ بِنُورِ رَبِّهَا وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ وَجِئَتْ بِالسَّاعِ
وَالشَّهْدَاءُ وَفُضِيَ بَيْنَهُم بِالْحَقِّ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ



⁴⁶ The Disciples of Christ were an unlikely group to be sent forth on his mission to reach the world. There was nothing special or spectacular about them. The twelve apostles were just ordinary working men. One was a tax-collector. At least four of the apostles were fishermen (probably the reason that one of the earliest and most prominent Christian symbols was the fish – the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, formed an acrostic: *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter*, which means “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”.) But Jesus entrusted them with the most extraordinary task of proclaiming the advent of the kingdom of God to the entire world including one of the mightiest empires ever known.

Peter was crucified upside down about 66 AD in Rome.

Paul was beheaded about the same time also in Rome.

Andrew traveled and preached widely in Russia, Asia Minor, Turkey and in Greece. He was crucified in Greece.

“Doubting” Thomas was active in Syria and according to tradition in India where he died pierced by spears of four soldiers.

Philip had a ministry in North Africa and then in Asia Minor where he converted the wife of a Roman proconsul and was consequently cruelly put to death by him.

Matthew ministered in Persia and Ethiopia and is reported to have been stabbed in Ethiopia.

Bartholomew travelled to India, Armenia, Ethiopia and Southern Arabia. There are various accounts of his martyrdom.

James the son of Alpheus taught in Syria where he was stoned and then clubbed to death.

Simon the Zealot went to Persia and was martyred after refusing to sacrifice to the sun god

Matthias (elected to replace Judas) went to Syria and was burnt to death.

John traveled to Ephesus and was exiled to the island of Patmos. according to an early Latin tradition was cast into boiling oil in Rome.

⁴⁷ King James Version: every creature;

God's Word version: tell everyone the good news;

Easy Read Version translation of the Bible: Go everywhere in the world. Tell the good News to everyone)

(The Greek word is *κτίσις* or *ktisis* – all created beings 'believers and unbelievers, and institutions).

⁴⁸ *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:261:

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَتَتْ سَنَابِلَ فِي كُلِّ
سَبِيلَةٍ وَبِئْسَ حَبَّةٌ وَاللَّهُ يُضَعِفُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣١﴾

⁴⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Provisional Translations, *Star of the West* (Volume 1).

⁵⁰ *al-Maida*, The Table Spread, 5:32:

مِنْ أَجْلِ ذَلِكَ كَتَبْنَا عَلَى بَنِي إِسْرَءِيلَ أَنَّهُ مَن قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ
فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ
جَمِيعًا وَلَقَدْ جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُمْ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فِي
الْأَرْضِ لَمُسْرِفُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person — unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land — It would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our Apostles with Clear Signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land.

⁵¹ The History of the Armenian Church:

Along with his fellow apostle Jude Thaddeus, Bartholomew is reputed to have brought Christianity to Armenia in the 1st century. Thus, both saints are considered the patron saints of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* (5:10) states that after the Ascension, Bartholomew went on a missionary tour to India, where he left behind a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. Other traditions record him as serving as a missionary in Ethiopia, Mesopotamia, Parthia, and Lycaonia. Popular traditions and legends say that Bartholomew preached the Gospel in India, then went to Greater Armenia.

He is said to have been martyred in Albanopolis in Armenia. According to one account, he was beheaded, but a more popular tradition holds that he was flayed alive and crucified, head downward. He is said to have converted Polymius, the king of Armenia, to Christianity. Astyages, Polymius' brother, consequently ordered Bartholomew's execution.

The 13th century Saint Bartholomew Monastery was a prominent Armenian monastery constructed at the site of the martyrdom of Apostle Bartholomew in the Vaspurakan Province of Greater Armenia (now in southeastern Turkey).

⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Provisional Translations, *Star of the West* (Volume 1).

⁵³ *al-Qasas*, The Story, 28:5:

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً
وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ ﴿٥٠﴾

And We wished to be gracious to those who were being depressed in the land, to make them leaders (in faith, imáms) and make them heirs

⁵⁴ Also quoted by Shoghi Effendi in ADJ 62-63 and WOB 77.

⁵⁵ Sabá or Shebá, 34:15:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لِسَبَإٍ فِي مَسْكَنِهِمْ آيَةٌ جَنَّتَانِ عَنْ يَمِينٍ وَشِمَالٍ كُلُوا مِنْ رِزْقِ
رَبِّكُمْ وَأَشْكُرُوا لَهُ: بَلَدَةٌ طَيِّبَةٌ وَرَبِّ غَفُورٌ ﴿١٥﴾

⁵⁶ Sabá or Shebá, 34:16-17:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لِسَبَإٍ فِي مَسْكَنِهِمْ آيَةٌ جَنَّتَانِ عَنْ يَمِينٍ وَشِمَالٍ كُلُوا مِنْ رِزْقِ
رَبِّكُمْ وَأَشْكُرُوا لَهُ: بَلَدَةٌ طَيِّبَةٌ وَرَبِّ غَفُورٌ ﴿١٦﴾

فَأَعْرِضُوا فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ سَيْلَ الْعَرِمِ وَبَدَّلْنَاهُمْ بِجَنَّتَيْهِمْ جَنَّتَيْنِ
ذَوَاتِ أُكُلٍ خَمْطٍ وَأَثَلٍ وَشَيْءٍ مِّنْ سِدْرٍ قَلِيلٍ ﴿١٧﴾

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَيْنَاهُمْ بِمَا كَفَرُوا وَهَلْ يُجْزَىٰ إِلَّا الْكَافُرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

⁵⁷ *Mú-min*, or The Believer, 40:82-85:

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَنِيبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ
كَانُوا أَكْثَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ قُوَّةً وَأَعَارَآ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَمَا آغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا
يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَرِحُوا بِمَا عِنْدَهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ
مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا قَالُوا ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَحَدَّثَهُ: وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِ مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

فَلَمْ يَكْ يَنْفَعُهُمْ إِيمَانُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا بَاسًا شِئْتَ اللَّهُ الَّتِي قَدْ خَلَتْ فِي
عِبَادِيهِ ۖ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

⁵⁸ *Al-Rúm*, The Byzantines, 30:9-12:

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ
كَانُوا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَأَثَارُوا الْأَرْضَ وَعَمَرُوهَا أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا عَمَرُوهَا
وَجَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيَظْلِمَهُمْ وَلَكِنْ كَانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ
يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

ثُمَّ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا السُّوْأَىٰ أَنْ كَذَّبُوا
بِعَايَةِ اللَّهِ وَكَانُوا بِهَا يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

اللَّهُ يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُبْلِسُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

⁵⁹ *Muhammad*, 47:7-11:

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَتَعَسَا لَهُمْ وَأَضَلَّ أَعْمَلُهُمْ ﴿٨﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَرِهُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَلَهُمْ ﴿٩﴾

❖ أَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ

دَمَّرَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ أَمُودُهَا ﴿١٠﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَأَنَّ الْكَافِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَى لَهُمْ ﴿١١﴾

⁶⁰ *al-Hajj*, The Pilgrimage, 22:46

⁶¹ *Yúsuf*, Joseph, 12:109:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِيَ إِلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ أَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا
فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَنِيبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَدَارُ الْآخِرَةِ
خَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

⁶² *Fāṭir*, The Originator of Creation; or *Maláika*, The Angels, 35:44-45:

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَنِيبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ
وَكَانُوا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيُعْجِزَهُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَلَا
فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ عَلِيمًا قَدِيرًا ﴿٤٤﴾

وَلَوْ يُؤَاخِذُ اللَّهُ النَّاسَ بِمَا كَسَبُوا مَا تَرَكَ عَلَى ظَهْرِهَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ وَلَكِنْ
يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجْلُهُمْ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِ بَصِيرًا
﴿٤٥﴾

⁶³ *al-Rúm*, The Byzantines, 30:50

⁶⁴ *Shoghi Effendi*, by Marcus Bach, published in *The Circle of Faith*, Chapter 3, pp. 49-83, New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1957 and also *A meeting with Shoghi Effendi*, by Marcus Bach One World publications, p.37: "But the thing that struck me most as our meeting progressed was his (Shoghi Effendi's) unquestioned devotion to the Galilean (Jesus)."

⁶⁵ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer dated October 14, 1936 published in *Bahá'í Institutions* p. 95.

⁶⁶ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer dated March 5, 1957 published in *Compilation no. 66*.

⁶⁷ Battles of Verdun, Jutland and Somme.

⁶⁸ Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015: *America's Changing Religious Landscape*

⁶⁹ Basheer Mohammad, Pew Research Center, January 6, 2016: *A new estimate of the U.S. Muslim population*.

⁷⁰ Deuteronomy 4:1-2:

Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers giveth you.

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you

2 Peter 1:20:

"knowing this first: that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation" (i.e. the scriptures do not come from a private understanding nor must it be subjected to interpretation by the individual).

Revelation 22:18-19:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book:

And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

⁷¹ *Al-i-'Imrân, or The Family of Imrân, 3:7:*

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ
وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ
أَبِغَاءَ أَلْفِتْنَةٍ وَابْتَغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ ۚ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي
الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ



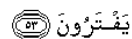
He it is Who hath revealed unto thee the Scripture wherein are clear revelations — they are the substance of the Book — and others (which are) allegorical. But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. None knoweth its explanation (ta'wîl) save God. And those who are of sound instruction say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.

⁷² *al-A'raf, The Heights, 7:52-53:*

وَلَقَدْ جِئْنَاهُمْ بِكِتَابٍ فَصَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ هُدًى وَرَحْمَةً
لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ



هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأْوِيلَهُ يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلُهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ نَسُوهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ
قَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ فَهَلْ لَنَا مِنْ شُفَعَاءَ فَيَشْفَعُوا لَنَا أَوْ نُرَدُّ
فَنَعْمَلْ غَيْرَ الَّذِي كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ قَدْ خَسِرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا



And now have we brought them the Book: with knowledge have we explained it; a guidance and a mercy to them that believe.

What have they to wait for now but its interpretation (ta'wil)? When its interpretation (ta'wil) shall come, they who aforetime were oblivious of it shall say, "The Prophets of our Lord did indeed bring the truth; shall we have any intercessor to intercede for us? or could we not be sent back? Then would we act otherwise than we have acted." But they have ruined themselves; and the deities of their own devising have fled from them!

⁷³ reference.bahai.org/fa/t/o/MASH2/mash2-233.html

⁷⁴ John L. Allen Jr. The dramatic growth of evangelicals in Latin America. National Catholic reporter. Aug. 18, 2006.

⁷⁵ *Lights of Guidance* #1664: From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, April 27, 1936.

⁷⁶ Queen Marie of Romania

⁷⁷ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer dated April 27, 1936 published in *Lights of Guidance* 1664.

⁷⁸ Shoghi Effendi, letter, 7 May 1936.

⁷⁹ *al-Baqarah*, The Cow, 2:106:

﴿ مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ
عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴾

None of Our revelations (verses) do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that God Hath power over all things?

⁸⁰ *Lights of Divine Guidance* #1670: From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, November 12, 1933.

⁸¹ From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian by his secretary to an individual believer, November 19, 1945: *Bahá'í News*, No. 210, p. 3, August 1948.

⁸² Ibsen, Emperor and Galilean.

Grand Narratives and the Bahá'í Writings

Ian Kluge

Introduction

This paper takes its cue from Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, who calls on Bahá'ís “to *investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith* and to *correlate* them with the modern aspects of *philosophy* and science.”¹ He reinforces this point by saying,

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people ... who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can *correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world*.²

He adds, furthermore, that

If the Bahá'ís want to be *really effective in teaching the Cause* they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems ... who [are] capable of *correlating our teachings to the current thoughts* of the leaders of society.³

It is worth noting that the Guardian associates “*really effective*” teaching with the ability to “correlate” the Bahá’í teachings with current issues and debates in society. Such correlations can be “really effective” because they help make the Writings part of public discourse about contemporary topics and, thereby, draw awareness to the Writings themselves by showing their relevance to modern issues. In addition, they can show that the Bahá’í Writings have uniquely new ideas and perspectives to share with the world.

The concept of grand narratives has been and is still under continued and strenuous attack in our time, being blamed, among other things, for being totalitarian and setting the stage for totalitarian regimes;⁴ for engaging in intellectual “terrorism”⁵ by ‘marginalizing the ‘others’ who are different; and for Western triumphalism and its concomitant colonialism. The Bahá’í Faith has not — to the best of our knowledge — been explicitly accused of these short-comings, but the existence of its grand narrative of progressive revelation leaves it open to allegations of this nature. Therefore, in the first part of this paper we shall examine the nature of grand narratives, appraise some of the major attacks on them and present our understanding of the Bahá’í grand narrative and why the criticisms *vis-à-vis* grand narratives do not apply to the Writings.

In the second part of this paper we correlate the Bahá’í grand narrative with the three most influential non-totalitarian grand narratives of the twentieth century — Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee and Pitirim Sorokin — and point out the unique features of the Bahá’í grand narrative that compensate for the short-comings of other theories.

We draw three major conclusions from our study. First, the arguments against grand narratives are logically unconvincing and paradoxically self-refuting. Second, there are numerous and far-reaching correlations between the Bahá’í Writings and the work of Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin. Third, alone among

these grand narratives, the Bahá'í Writings go beyond diagnosis of the patterns of human history and complete the diagnosis with a prescription and the establishment of a healing institution, i.e. the Universal House of Justice. This completeness – diagnosis, prescription and healing institution – allows the Writings to work as a plan for the next stage of human evolution.

PART I: Grand Narratives

Background, Controversies and an Overview of the Bahá'í Grand Narrative

1: Introduction

Grand narratives or metanarratives are stories or narratives by means of which we interpret and understand history. A narrative may be defined as a series of coherently presented real or imagined events explicitly or implicitly embedding an interpretation of the events. In the field of history, such events and their interpretations may cover local, national, international and even cosmic history.⁶ Their prime task is reveal certain patterns, trends, laws or themes guiding, informing, shaping the historical processes in societies, nations or even the world as a whole.⁷ In other words, metanarratives purport to demonstrate that history has implicit or explicit order, coherence and meaning despite superficial appearances of disorder, randomness even anarchy. Consequently, for grand narratives the unfolding of history is not just a series of random, accidental events without any overall order, tendency or direction. Instead, history has patterns and to that extent is rational and can be understood rationally.

Moreover, these patterns, themes or principles help us establish (1) values; (2) criteria for objectively evaluating historical facts as well as standards for identifying goodness,

truth, legitimacy; (3) consequences and/or logical inferences from the grand narrative and (4) criteria for making predictions about the course of history. They are the contexts within which we form our beliefs. In embryonic or fully developed form, grand narratives embody a world-view by which both individuals and societies consciously or unconsciously orient their lives in regards to fundamental values such as meaning and purpose, ‘the good,’ justice and ‘evil.’ As will be shown below, history is replete with examples of grand narratives functioning as world-views for numerous civilizations.

For grand narratives, the unfolding of history is not just a series of random, accidental events without any overall order, tendency or direction. Instead, history has patterns and to that extent is rational and can be understood rationally. The existence of order, coherence and meaning in history makes some degree of predictability possible. Consequently, these patterns, themes and laws make some degree of historical predictability possible. The kind of predictions are usually statistical in nature; like actuarial tables in the life insurance industry, the patterns of events allow us to calculate general trends – or the probability of death among certain groups of people – without being able to predict an individual death. The immense profitability of the life insurance industry demonstrates the effectiveness of such statistical predictions.

The Bahá’í Writings explicitly embody a grand narrative of the history of humankind as well as a vision for its future culmination in a unified global commonwealth. Without this grand narrative, much of the *raison d’être* of the Bahá’í Faith would vanish since it is Bahá’u’lláh’s specific mission as a Manifestation of God to guide human history to its culmination in world unity [WOB 162]. In the words of Shoghi Effendi,

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have

been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving [WOB 202, emphasis added].

This study of grand or metanarratives and the Bahá'í Writings aims to accomplish three main goals:

1. To show how the Bahá'í Writings explicitly embody a grand narrative of the history of humankind;
2. To show how the Bahá'í grand narrative has important similarities to three influential metanarratives by Oswald Spengler, Arnold J Toynbee and Pitirim Sorokin;
3. To demonstrate the untenability of various criticisms of the concept of grand narratives in general, and of the Bahá'í grand narrative in particular.

These three goals are interdependent insofar as they are necessary to provide more than a skeletal presentation of the subject and to be useful in explicating the Bahá'í Writings, in apologetics and engaging in dialogue with other religions or schools of thought.

2: Grand Narratives: The Historical Background

Grand narratives are not a modern invention. Religions embed metanarratives either in developed or in embryonic form.⁸ One of the earliest is the Zoroastrian doctrine that existence is a universal and cosmic struggle between truth and order on one side and lie and chaos on the other; our duty is to support the truth and order. This view gives a cosmic dimension to all individual and social actions, e.g. personal business dealings or exchanges with neighbors as well as political events at the local, national and even transnational levels. In short, history is a struggle for the victory of the good. The Jewish grand narrative concerns the story of the Jewish people (and by extension, humanity as a whole) overcoming their exile from Paradise and finding their way home to the

Promised Land. During the wanderings, a pattern emerges of falling away from God, suffering the consequences and eventually triumphing. Here, too, victory, i.e. attainment of the Promised Land, is identified with the good. The Christian grand narrative includes the struggle of good against evil, but has a personal salvational emphasis focussed on the redemption for original sin bought for us by the crucifixion. The ultimate providential aim is for individuals to save their souls and to work for the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth. The Muslim metanarrative takes up this theme of a providential kingdom on earth which is set forth in greater detail than in Christianity and proclaims the end of historical revelation with Mohammed. The Muslim revelation essentially marks the end of history as a process to a greater goal.

Numerous philosophers have written enormously influential grand narratives about particular societies and about universal history. Saint Augustine's *City of God* – clearly influenced by Zoroastrian dualism – portrays the history of humankind as a struggle between God and the Devil, and our need to choose between the City of Man and the City of God. This clearly fits into the Christian tradition. The 12th century CE theologian Joachim of Fiore included the concept of progress in his three-fold division of history: the Age of the Father with its Old Testament emphasis on law and obedience; the Age of the Son which included law but emphasized mercy; and the Age of the [Holy] Spirit in which a “universal Christian society”⁹ would emerge. Ibn Khaldun, a 14th century CE Arab Muslim writer also saw a cyclic pattern of increasing immorality and corruption when successors took over from the founding generations of great dynasties. The cyclical nature of this seemingly inevitable process allows a measure of predictability in the historical process if not in specific events then in the nature and sequence of events. Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* (1725 CE) shows history as a progressing and expanding spiral. The cycles represent the three stages of development: the age of the gods in which humans are ruled by supernatural

beings or God; the age of heroes in which humans are ruled by aristocratic classes; the age of equality in which all people viewed themselves as equal at least insofar as they shared a common humanity. The first led to theocratic government or rule by priests; the second to aristocratic government or monarchies; the third led to republican or democratic government. According to Vico “the nature of peoples is first crude, then severe, then benign then delicate and finally dissolute.”¹⁰ After this, the cycle begins again though always “recurring on a higher plane.”¹¹ Thus Vico combined the ideas of progress and cyclical patterns to show history as predictable at least the kind of developments we can expect.

The 18th century CE of the European Enlightenment — so vehemently excoriated by the postmodernists — marks the beginning of an unusually productive period in the efforts to understand history. What almost all of these efforts have in common is belief in the progress of humankind not only in scientific knowledge but also in the growth of rationality, freedom and social and cultural tolerance. Moreover, a theme hitherto implicit in earlier grand narratives came to the fore at this time: the perfectibility of man, society and the world. Kant’s “*Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*” is a good example.¹² According to Kant, the purpose of history is the extension of individual freedom in an ordered national and international society. Viewing history as a whole, he states,

history, which is concerned with narrating these appearances, permits us to hope *that if we attend to the play of freedom of the human will in the large*, we may be able to discern *a regular movement* in it, and that what seems complex and chaotic in the single individual may be seen from the standpoint of the human race as a whole to be a steady and progressive though slow evolution of its original endowment.¹³

According to Kant,

The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature's *secret plan* to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end.¹⁴

The mechanism by which humanity will actualize its “original endowment” is that our lower animal nature drives us to overcome ourselves — because we can’t accept ourselves as mere animals — and to develop our higher natures. From a Bahá’í perspective this is a true but inadequate motivation for progress because it sidesteps the need for Manifestation.

Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* sees history as the conscious self-actualization of the Spirit in humankind and through human history and the growth of freedom. In the end, all humans will recognize themselves as free and as one with the Spirit. Hegel’s erstwhile student, Marx, also promulgated a metanarrative based on the concept of class war between the ruling classes and the ruled and exploited. Eventually, the exploited classes would triumph and there would be a “withering away of the state.”¹⁵ Some modern feminist metanarratives center on the claim that patriarchy, i.e. a male-dominated society has a specifically anti-female agenda which has dominated history so far in all parts of the world. Instead of seeing history in terms of class struggle, they see it terms of struggle between the sexes with themselves in the role of the proletariat.

The Bahá’í Writings do not view history as a struggle between classes, genders, political parties, races, tribes or nations but rather as a struggle to increase awareness of and commitment to the unification of mankind. This struggle is spiritual, epistemological and ethical in nature and employs persuasion, and instead of various methods of power-seeking such as partisan political warfare. They aim “*to awaken spiritual susceptibilities in the hearts of mankind, to kindle anew the*

spirit of humanity with divine fires and to reflect the glory of heaven to this gloomy world of materialism" [PUP 7]. The Writings view history as a process leading to the unification of humankind in a global federal commonwealth united by "*one common faith*" [SAQ ch.12].¹⁶

although this process does not necessarily follow a simple linear progress. With this goal in mind, they emphasize a "*world-embracing*" [TB 86] vision because there is no other adequate way of understanding human nature and history in the contemporary world. Less expansive views do not allow us to see the global development of humankind that has already been achieved, nor to project these achievements into the future just as we cannot 'see' the progress of a river from a deep valley. However, a "*world-embracing*" vision allows such insight in the same way that we may see the course of a river from a high mountain.

Furthermore, the Writings are not alone in recognizing that a "*world-embracing*" vision is necessary for a deeper understanding of human history. There are several new developments in the pursuit of global historical studies. We observe, for example, the establishment of the World History Association which studies history from "a trans-national, trans-regional, and trans-cultural perspective"¹⁷ has been growing and developing since 1980. An examination of the WHA's specialities shows that the WHA is doing the same kind of studies as Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin.¹⁸ We also note the rising interest in 'Big History,'¹⁹ which starts history with the Big Bang and reveals various patterns repeating themselves throughout cosmic and human history.²⁰ Juan Jose Gomez-Ibarra's *A Scientific Model of History: Where is the Future Leading Us*²¹ (2003) shows the scientific laws – such as Malthus and Toynbee's 'challenge and response – underlying historical processes. Ross E. Dunn and Laura J. Mitchell's *Panorama: A World History* is yet another example of historians working from a global perspective. In addition, there is Immanuel Wallerstein's "world systems theory."²² Sebastian Conrad calls

these expanded visions of history the “all-in version of global history”²³ or “planetary comprehensiveness.”²⁴ We also refer readers to R. MacNeil and W.H. MacNeil, *The Human Web: A Bird’s-Eye View of World History*²⁵ which demonstrates how communications are unifying the world. Finally, we should take note of the rise of Civilizational Science, an interdisciplinary field which uses a scientific approach (e.g. the Annales School) to pursue macro-historical studies (e.g., Toynbee) to “address some of the most important problems of globalizing society in the 21 century and beyond.”²⁶

3: Why Grand Narratives? Four Reasons

At this point we may ask ‘Why are humans so fascinated with grand narratives? Why do these ‘stories’ keep reappearing – as, for example, in the recent ascent of Big History, Global History and scientific history? ‘What characteristics seem to make them indispensable?’ Why, for example, are the works of Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin and Marx still read even though most professional historians ignore them or dismiss them as misleading? Why do established academic historians like the MacNeil’s still try to demonstrate the existence of a pattern uniting global history?

In our view, there are at least four reasons why grand narratives survive and will continue to survive.

First, every religion is a grand narrative – at least in outline or embryo form – that shapes our understanding of the reality, truth, goodness and morality, justice, human nature, and values. Religious stories provide a way of understanding individual and group behavior in the present and the past. For a pre-literate culture to say ‘We do things this way because our ancestors did’ is, in effect, an embryonic grand narrative about the past, present and future. In short, as long as religions exist, grand narratives will continue. The fact that anthropologists have never encountered a group of humans without religion indicates how indispensable religion and its implicit and explicit

grand narratives are to human survival and well-being. Religions, of course, are more than metanarratives; they are, for the most part, revelations from God [GWB 217]²⁷ to advance our spiritual development. However, when we accept a Manifestation and His spiritual teachings, we also implicitly accept a grand narrative. Consequently, it seems self-evident that believing we can live without a grand narratives of one kind or another violates our empirical anthropological knowledge of human nature.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá presents a second reason why metanarratives are necessary: they are necessary to help us make sense of ourselves and the world in general, i.e. they have an epistemological function. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *“The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one and the same thing”* [SAQ ch.55]. Because humans have a “rational soul,” we naturally want things to ‘make sense,’ i.e. to be understandable, intelligible, justifiable, self-consistent and practicable. Even Pieter Geyl, one of most relentless critics of metanarratives, admits that it is “an ingrained habit of human nature ... to try to construct a vision of history in which chaos, or apparent chaos, is restored to order.”²⁸ (Unfortunately, he does not ask why this habit is so deeply ingrained.) Without order, there is no understanding, and without understanding life becomes meaningless and even catastrophic: it is virtually impossible to make sense of ourselves and the world around us and, thereby, a clear sense of identity, of our values and of our goals. This, in turn, undermines our ability to act rationally and coherently and to maintain social relationships. How could a society made up of such individuals function? If we cannot act with a certain consistency, we shall often undermine our own efforts and confuse ourselves and others. In effect, we fail to actualize ourselves as “rational souls” – our essential attribute [SAQ ch.55] – at the personal and societal level, and, therefore, cannot function optimally. For example, if we fail to recognize and act

on the Bahá'í teaching that all human beings have both a spiritual and a physical nature [SAQ ch.29] and that the spiritual function must rule, then we are severely hindered in actualizing our essence as “rational souls.” In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *“If the physical or natural disposition in him should overcome the heavenly and merciful, he is, then, the most degraded of animal beings”* [PUP 41]. We are incomplete beings whose *“spiritual susceptibilities”* [PUP 339] remain dormant. We remain at or close to the level of animals without the activation of our higher capacities.

Helping us gain such understanding of ourselves and the world is one of the benefits conferred by the Manifestations Who, for example, teach us about our spiritual and animal natures and the long-term benefits of having our spiritual nature in control. In addition, the Manifestations provide a ‘map’ or a guidebook to reality, its nature, its purpose and its goal or final cause. As humankind progresses, the accidental or culture-bound attributes of former metanarratives are abandoned and a new Manifestation arrives to establish a new grand narrative commensurate with the intellectual, social, material and spiritual development of the time. In other words, the continual presence of Manifestations means that there never has been a time when grand narratives of one kind or another have not guided human thought, feeling and action. In short, metanarratives are so important to human development that God sends Manifestations to establish them.

The third major function of grand narratives is also epistemological but in a more technical sense, i.e. to bring order to our knowledge and thinking. Bringing order to any kind of knowledge and thought requires us to prioritize or privilege (a) some facts over others vis-à-vis truth, relevance and importance and (b) some sources of knowledge and knowledge-claims over others. In practical terms, we must choose if we are going to take surgical advice from a surgeon or an astrologer. We must be able to recognize and distinguish between the essential and non-essential aspects of information

and discard what is less important and unreliable sources. In religion, it is the Manifestation Who “distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings” [PDC 108]. Such distinctions are necessary because no one can accept all knowledge sources and knowledge as equally relevant or as equally valid because that makes it impossible to take action — which requires us to select one option or fact over another. Furthermore, such distinctions are also necessary because humans are fallible and not all knowledge claims are equally valid.²⁹ This inevitably sets up a hierarchy of knowledge. The Writings obviously privilege Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as infallible knowledge vis-à-vis the teachings of the Faith. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh, God's Manifestation for this age, clearly rejects some sources of knowledge as invalid when he says,

Its [the world's] sickness is approaching the stage of utter hopelessness, inasmuch as the true Physician is debarred from administering the remedy, whilst unskilled practitioners are regarded with favor, and are accorded full freedom to act... [GWB 39-40]

Similarly, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says,

This panacea [of religion] must, however, be administered by a wise and skilled physician, for in the hands of an incompetent all the cures that the Lord of men has ever created to heal men's ills could produce no health, and would on the contrary only destroy the helpless and burden the hearts of the already afflicted. [SDC 98]

The Writings clearly endorse such prioritizing since not all remedies and/or knowledge claims are equally effective as shown in the reference to “unskilled practitioners.” Furthermore, from the quotations given above, the Writings clearly privilege one side of the following binary oppositions: competent/incompetent; rational/irrational; true/untrue; order/

disorder; health/sickness; knowledge/ignorance; and enemy/friend. Indeed, the unskilled physician who pretends to be skilled is, in effect, an enemy to the patient. It is irrational to bar the “true Physician” because doing so upends the proper order of things and is, thereby, not only chaotic but unjust. Other binary oppositions implicitly or explicitly found in the Writings and the Bahá’í grand narrative are essential/accidental; order/disorder; progressive/regressive; noumenal/phenomenal; true/untrue; moral/immoral; knowledge/superstition; rational/irrational, good/evil-satanic [GWB 19] and primitive/civilized.

These binary oppositions are a part of the Bahá’í metanarrative. Removing them undermines the Bahá’í teachings. For example, if we refuse to privilege truth, i.e. refuse to declare truth superior to untruth, we would also undermine every statement in which Bahá’u’lláh claims to speak the truth. He says, “*Wherefore, should one of these Manifestations of Holiness proclaim saying: ‘I am the return of all the Prophets,’ He, verily, speaketh the truth*” [GWB 51]. This statement, which is taken as true in the Bahá’í context, is privileged over its denial and, therefore, is more valuable than the denial of Bahá’u’lláh’s words since it reveals something fundamental about the Manifestations and history. In short, the denial is simply wrong.³⁰ By means of these oppositions, metanarratives take on a prescriptive function not only for individuals but for entire societies which use them to construct their world views. In short, metanarratives help individuals and societies make sense of the world.

Privileging truth statements is also an example of the “legitimation of knowledge,”³¹ which is to say that the metanarrative provides the standard for identifying truth. It provides the foundational principles by which to distinguish ‘real knowledge,’ fact or truth from error, superstition, myth or the utterances of the insane. Of course, the “legitimation of knowledge” is obvious in the Bahá’í Faith insofar as both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are regarded as infallible and Shoghi Effendi as infallible his interpretations of the Writings.

Say: This [revelation] is the infallible Balance which the Hand of God is holding, in which all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth are weighed, and their fate determined, if ye be of them that believe and recognize this truth. Say: Through it the poor have been enriched, the learned enlightened. [GWB 136]

Because the Manifestation and His revelation are the balance for assaying the truth, He also has to clear away – uproot and destroy – falsehood. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

The divine Manifestations have been iconoclastic in Their teachings, uprooting error, destroying false religious beliefs and summoning mankind anew to the fundamental oneness of God. [PUP 154]

Thus, the metanarrative becomes the gatekeeper of knowledge. It is worth emphasizing that the Manifestations mission of “uprooting error” and “destroying false religious beliefs” shows that not all knowledge-claims are valid and that at least some beliefs are erroneous.

The fourth major function of grand narratives is the “legitimation of power,” i.e. they provide a rationale to explain why certain individuals or groups have power and why or why not such power is legitimate or illegitimate. Such legitimation is necessary to maintain at least a certain minimum of social stability. The Bahá'í grand narrative also fulfills this function insofar as its metaphysical framework explains the unique metaphysical status of the Manifestations:

And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. Unto this subtle this mysterious and

ethereal Being He hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself. He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself ... The second station is the human station, exemplified by the following verses: "I am but a man like you." [GWB 66]

This passage explains why, metaphysically speaking, the power of the Manifestations is legitimate: They are God's representative on earth. Their power is justified or legitimated by Their omniscience because They, not we, truly understand what is best for humankind inasmuch as Their knowledge of us is complete and not limited by time or space. Moreover, because Their power is metaphysically based, there is no legitimate replacement – Their status, power and omniscience are part of the basic structure of reality itself. Lyotard, Foucault, and others would, of course, portray God as a dictator but this critique overlooks the free will God bestows upon the individual as one of our essential attributes. We shall discuss this in more detail below.

4: The Bahá'í Grand Narrative: Getting Started

There is, in our view, no question that the Bahá'í Writings establish a grand narrative of the gradual unification of humankind into a world federal commonwealth united in "*one common faith*" [SAQ ch.12]. This will be achieved by the actualization of humanity's physical, intellectual and spiritual potentials guided by the successive Manifestations of God each of Whom inaugurates a dispensation [DG 7].³² Each dispensation passes through a spring, summer, autumn, fall and winter at which time a new dispensation begins. The pattern of ascent, apex and decline is universal and applies to all cultures none of which is eternal and each of which has an inevitable, pre-

ordained end. Thus the Bahá'í metanarrative reflects a synthesis of linear, i.e. progressive as well as cyclical theories of history which may be represented by an expanding and advancing spiral. Our progress is inspired and guided by the succession of Manifestations to the goal of unifying mankind into a federal world commonwealth united by "one common faith." This final goal sheds new light on the meaning to human history as a whole. For example, W.W. II may be seen not only as a result from a series of tragic diplomatic, political and military events but also as a part of the process of weakening the colonial powers and, thereby, enabling colonized peoples to begin their struggle for freedom and future independent development.

Regarded cosmically, the Bahá'í grand narrative begins with the intentional creation of the phenomenal world by a loving God [PUP 298] Who bestows on all things signs of "*His names and attributes*" [GWB 178] as well as the latent perfections [GWB 259] to be actualized over time. These divine bestowals are real and objective values which form an integral part of the cosmic historical process, i.e. the struggle to actualize the potentials inherent in all things. Since humans struggle to do the same, their evolutionary striving for complete actualization is a specialized case of the teleological striving of the entire phenomenal world. From this we may infer that history has a meaning, and exemplifies certain values like unity, self-overcoming and "*awaken[ed] spiritual susceptibilities*" [PUP 7]. The divine origin of the phenomenal, i.e. created world and the presence of God's "names and attributes" in all things demonstrates that these values are real and objective aspects of phenomenal reality. It also demonstrates the sacred nature of reality as well as the sacred nature of the cosmic and human historical process.

The human historical process is the vanguard of cosmic evolution because God created man as the "*supreme talisman*" [GWB 259] who not only represents all "the names and attributes" of God in creation but is also the "*fruit*" [PUP 6] or ultimate purpose of cosmic evolution. Mankind is the highest

expression of the cosmic process. Without humankind, the material world would have “*no use*” [SAQ ch.50]. From this we may conclude that in the Bahá’í grand narrative, cosmic evolution and human evolution and history are integrated, i.e. aspects of a greater whole. Humankind plays a real part in the evolution of the cosmos – it is not “*an accidental composition or arrangement*” [SAQ ch.47] but is, rather, an essential part of the cosmos actualizing its own hidden potentials. This suggests that a proper understanding of humans and human nature is necessary for a proper understanding of the physical world. Because cosmic evolution has a purpose, it is both teleological and progressive and, thereby, rational, i.e. the purpose and the means are adapted to one another and work together. The same is true of mankind’s historical development inasmuch as it is directed to achieving a goal set by “*that invisible yet rational God*” [WOB 112].

In the historical process, we observe the expansion of the social unit, i.e. increasing inclusiveness to include previously excluded or marginalized groups. This process seems to be proceeding with increasing speed since the 15th century CE with the European voyages of ‘discovery.’ The entire history of mankind from pre-historic times to the 21st Century can be understood in light of this theme. In the words of Shoghi Effendi,

This will indeed be the fitting climax of that *process of integration* which, starting with the family, the smallest unit in the scale of human organization, must, after having called successively into being the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, continue to operate until it *culminates in the unification of the whole world*, the final object and the crowning glory of human evolution on this planet. It is this stage which humanity, willingly or unwillingly, is resistlessly approaching. [PDC 117]

He re-emphasizes this by saying,

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. [WOB 202, emphasis added]

We begin with the family, advance through clan and tribe, then proceed to city-states, nations, empires and collaborative supra-national alliances and end with a world federal commonwealth. The changes in consciousness and spirituality required for this development occur through the often unnoticed influence of the successive Manifestations, and in our age, of Bahá'u'lláh Whose teachings are the most appropriate and advanced guidance for our time. In the process of actualizing its potentials, humankind starts coalescing into larger and larger social units which require further actualization of social capacities, intellectual and spiritual capacities and even material capacities. It is worth noting the inevitability of mankind's integration into one global commonwealth in which *"All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people"* [SAQ ch.12]. This process will not be without tremendous suffering; as Shoghi Effendi tells us,

Much suffering will still be required ere the contending nations, creeds, classes and races of mankind are fused in the crucible of universal affliction, and are forged by the fires of a fierce ordeal into one organic commonwealth, one vast, unified, and harmoniously functioning system. [WOB 193]

Such statements facilitate the conclusion that the Bahá'í Writings portray history as teleological with a divinely fixed and inescapable goal. Our only choice is whether we shall advance towards this goal "willingly or unwillingly." Following

the analogy of adolescence [PUP 439] used in the Writings, humanity may choose to grow up the hard way or the easier way, but in either case we shall grow up. Those who oppose global unification will end up working for it despite their intentions. As the Báb says, “*All are His servants and all abide by His bidding!*” [SWB 214] In other words, subjectively we may think our actions hinder the unificatory process but objectively, in actual effect, our actions help the process in the long run. This is illustrated by the Bahá’í diaspora after the 1979 revolution in Iran. The Bahá’í diaspora spread the teachings of the Faith on a global scale and drew world-wide attention which attracted more people to Bahá’u’lláh.

Progressing to the goal of world unification requires the actualization of intellectual potentials and the “*awaken[ing of] spiritual susceptibilities in the hearts of mankind*” [PUP 7]. Awakening the “susceptibilities” is a duty incumbent on all insofar as Bahá’u’lláh states, “*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214]. In this process, humanity is guided by the successive Manifestations of God each of Whom inaugurates a dispensation that passes through a spring, summer, autumn, fall and winter at which time a new dispensation begins to progress even further towards the ultimate goal. Two points are clear from this teaching. First, dispensations and their associated civilizations are not eternal. There is no final divine dispensation — a teaching contradicted by Judaism, Christianity, Islam and some interpretations of Buddhism — and there is no final civilization which humans cannot surpass. This doctrine undercuts the hubris of religious and cultural supremacist ideologies. Second, Manifestations are one of the ways in which God takes active part in human history. In other words, God is a ‘God of history’ insofar as He works through the actual, messy historical processes in which flawed human beings struggle through countless difficulties, many of them created by nature and/or their own behaviors. In other words, history manifests a

salvational or providential plan to bring genuine peace and advance the material and spiritual evolution of mankind.

Shoghi Effendi outlines the mission of Bahá'u'lláh — and all other Manifestations — as follows:

Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience. His aim is to widen the basis of all revealed religions and to unravel the mysteries of their scriptures. He insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions, and on this as a basis proclaims the possibility, and even prophecies the inevitability, of their unification, and the consummation of their highest hopes. [PDC 107]

This passage shows that the Manifestations have all been working towards the final goal of the historical process as a whole. This is one of the outstanding and unique features of the Bahá'í grand narrative: it includes without any qualification, all the Manifestations of God from all major religions as equal partners in history and especially in the spiritual history of mankind. All Manifestations have an unqualifiedly rightful place in the unfolding of history and are not accepted merely as a courtesy, as a matter of 'political correctness' or as display of tolerance.

At this point, the Bahá'í grand narrative shows part of its metaphysical foundations:

These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity. In this respect, if thou callest them all by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attributes, thou hast not erred from the truth. Even as He hath revealed: "No distinction do We make between any of His Messengers." ... The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. [GWB 50]

At the spiritual level, all the Manifestations are ontologically one and the same which is why Bahá'ís must accept and value all Manifestations as completely equal in all respects. However, the Manifestations are also distinct historical individuals fulfilling particular mandates for particular places, times and circumstances. From this perspective it becomes clear that contrary to the apparent plethora of religions, there is only one religion for all of humanity. All past religions have revealed various aspects appropriate to various spiritual, intellectual and material conditions. In the words of Dr. Moojan Momen,

Thus, we may describe Bahá'u'lláh's project as that of creating a *metareligion* — a religion that encompasses and provides a theoretical framework within which it is possible to see the truth of all religion.³³

In other words, from the unity of the Manifestations' missions, we also find that there is, in the last analysis, only one human history to which partial histories contribute.

5: The Four Foundational Principles of the Bahá'í Grand Narrative

In our view, the Bahá'í grand narrative is built on four principles. All attributions to the Bahá'í metanarrative must agree with or converge on or, at least, not contradict these principles which form the rational and coherent foundation of this master narrative. With this narrative we may interpret major historical developments by contextualizing them, i.e. by locating them and their effects vis-à-vis the advance towards world unification. As shall be discussed below, such assessments must also take into account “the wisdom of God” which reconciles human free will with a pre-determined historical outcome.³⁴

In our understanding, the first foundational principle of the Bahá'í historical metanarrative is the doctrine of “progressive revelation.” This doctrine asserts that mankind’s development is inspired and guided by successive Manifestations of God Who lead us to the continued actualization of our spiritual and material potentials. According to the Writings, “*without the teachings of God the world of humanity is like the animal kingdom*” [PUP 62] i.e. without the Manifestations, humankind would never advance beyond the limits of materialistic thought to the higher levels of specifically human development. The Manifestations’ spiritual teachings enable humanity’s other capacities to develop and progress:

“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. [PT 90, emphasis added]

Two statements are worth noting. First, matter becomes progressive through the action of spirit. Without spirit, matter is intrinsically in motion [SAQ ch.63] but it is not progressive in

the sense of having an intrinsic final cause that leads it to transcend its inherent limitations in greater unities. Second, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, refers to “the inevitable law of spiritual progress” which makes it clear that, with the guidance of the Manifestations, human progress is pre-destined, unavoidable and certain. This guaranteed – though not necessarily simple linear – progress is a distinguishing feature of the Bahá’í grand narrative. Insofar as the Manifestations inspire mankind’s progress, they are the origins of culture. As humanity advances spiritually and materially, additional Manifestations appear with new time-appropriate teachings that help us take the next step in spiritual and social progress. The essential teachings of the past are renewed, new teachings are added and the accidental features suitable to past times and places are abandoned. Shoghi Effendi writes the aim of each Manifestation is to

widen the basis of all revealed religions and to unravel the mysteries of their scriptures. He insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions, and on this as a basis proclaims the possibility, and even prophecies the inevitability, of their unification, and the consummation of their highest hopes. [PDC 108, emphasis added]

All these measures serve Bahá’u’lláh’s command that “*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214]. It is worth noting that “civilization” is singular thereby reminding us that the ultimate goal of the historic process is one civilization joined in a global federal commonwealth united in “*one common faith*” [SAQ ch.12]. Each culture makes its contribution to the final whole, thereby safeguarding the principle of unity in diversity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

prescribes other guidelines for contributing to an “ever-advancing civilization”:

It is now the time in the history of the world for us to strive and give an impetus to the advancement and development of inner forces – that is to say, we must arise to service in the world of morality, for human morals are in need of readjustment. We must also render service to the world of intellectuality in order that the minds of men may increase in power and become keener in perception, assisting the intellect of man to attain its supremacy so that the ideal virtues may appear. [PUP 325]

A key aspect of progressive revelation is that revelation is never-ending. Shoghi Effendi says, that Bahá'í

teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that *Divine Revelation is progressive, not final*. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind. [WOB 58]

This declaration not only establishes the centrality of progressive revelation in the Bahá'í world view, but also outlines the basic grand narrative explicitly and implicitly present in the Writings. Divine revelations exist to guide humankind throughout the phases of its development in a way that is appropriate to its condition at any given time. Hence, it progresses, i.e. reveals more as the human condition warrants and as we “*awaken spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 7]. There is no end to this revelation and, therefore, no final Manifestation or final formulation of the truth. Truth is “relative” inasmuch as the expressions of the divine truth are adapted to human condition at any given time, but – and this is essential to note – these culture-formed relative expressions are all expressions of certain enduring truths or “eternal verities” [PDC 108] as

Shoghi Effendi calls them. In other words, “*truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different*” [PT 121]. The fact that revelation is progressive means that the Bahá’í grand narrative of mankind’s history is teleological, i.e. goal and purpose driven to a particular end, i.e. the unification of mankind into a global federal commonwealth joined in “one common faith.” In other words, appearances to the contrary, history has an inherent order that includes some measure of predictability.

5.1: The Second Foundational Principle: The Oneness of Humankind³⁵

The second foundational principle of the Bahá’í grand narrative is

the principle of the Oneness of Mankind, the cornerstone of Bahá’u’lláh's world-embracing dominion, implies nothing more nor less than the enforcement of His scheme for the unification of the world. [WOB 36]

Without recognizing the essential one-ness of mankind, the vision of history as a grand narrative aimed at the unification of mankind would lack a workable foundation. Physical things, ideas and beliefs or events cannot be united in any durable way without sharing something in common.³⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that all human beings share an identical, essential nature in several ways. First, he declares that “*there are two natures in man: the physical nature and the spiritual nature*” [SAQ 118]. All human beings share this constitutional make-up. At the physical or natural level this essential nature is demonstrated by the universality of medical and physiological studies. While some medical differences between ethnic groups exist,³⁷ they are not enough to change our essential human nature. Even more, all humans share the essential attribute of having a “*rational soul*” which “*is the human reality*” [SAQ ch.38] or essence. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that which

distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings. [SAQ ch.55]

From these passages, we may conclude that humankind shares “the human spirit” or the “rational soul” as well as its dual constitution of our natural and spiritual aspects. Moreover, for all humans our natural or animal aspects are the source of “all imperfection” and the spiritual aspect is the “source of all perfection,” i.e. good [SAQ 118]. In short, all human beings share the same ontological structure which, as we shall see, the natural and spiritual aspects of the soul explain the origins of good and evil in humankind, i.e. the vices and virtues. On the other hand, the powers of the rational soul explain why humans everywhere have, at least in principle, the universal capacities for learning and thought, for rational action like building societies, and for creative invention among other things. Of course, the presence of these capacities does not always mean they are used to the same degree or to the same advantage. Nor does it prevent societies from getting ‘sick’ or succumbing to “maladaptive” i.e. self-destructive ideologies.³⁸

5.2: The Third Principle: The Unification of Mankind

The third principle of the Bahá'í grand narrative is the ultimate goal of the unification of humankind in a global commonwealth in which

All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland, which is the planet itself. [SAQ ch.12]

Shoghi Effendi makes the international aspect of this goal clear:

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. [WOB 203]

Clearly, the Bahá'í grand narrative is teleological in nature, a principle that allows us to understand and judge historical developments in light of the ultimate goal, i.e. whether they facilitate or hinder humanity's progress to this endpoint.

At this point it is essential to note a unique feature of the Bahá'í grand narrative. It combines freedom of the individual will with the principle of a determined ultimate goal in history. In other words, world unification is an inevitable goal — ultimately pre-determined by God — but how we get there, by easy ways or hard or by whatever process we individually and collectively choose, history will arrive at a global federal commonwealth united by “one common faith.” For example, humanity could have chosen the Most Great Peace when Bahá'u'lláh offered it but chose instead the trouble-ridden path to the Lesser Peace, leading Bahá'u'lláh to exhort, “*Now that ye have refused the Most Great Peace, hold ye fast unto this, the Lesser Peace, that haply ye may in some degree better your own condition and that of your dependents*” [GWB 253].

Statistical science tells us there is nothing inherently contradictory about a process that combines free individual choices and predictable and pre-determined ends for groups. Consider the actuarial tables compiled by life insurance companies. Countless millions of uncoordinated free individual decisions about life-style lead to orderly patterns and trends in death statistics that enable us to make predictions about groups and as well as identify life-expectancy probability for

individuals. Of course, there are always exceptions but the majority of people do, in fact, die as predicted which is why life insurance companies are so immensely profitable. The reason for this paradoxical result is the inherent parameters of human nature which constrain the number of possible outcomes which in turn leads inevitably to the formation of patterns and/or trends. Another illustration of this apparently self-contradictory phenomenon can be seen in the graph line of stock investments. The graph are the results of countless free uncoordinated individual decisions, but the overall direction or trend shows a preferential movement in a certain direction even if contrary trends appear from time to time. Many of these patterns and trends are so predictable that computers can be programmed to anticipate them and take action.

5.3: The Fourth Principle: The Means of Unification

Finally, the fourth principle of Bahá'í meta-history are the processes by which unification takes place. The first of these is the Manifestation of God Who comes to inaugurate a new stage of evolution in which humankind will make more spiritual, material and cultural progress. This process begins with destabilizing the established — though already disintegrating — order. Bahá'u'lláh says,

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

[GWB 136]

In other words, God sends a new Manifestation when one phase of human development has run its course i.e. actualized its potentials and a new one is to begin self-actualizing. Because the previous revelation and its social order no longer meets the needs of human progress, the new Manifestation arrives to

guide humankind through the next stage of spiritual, material and cultural growth. Through the Manifestations, God acts in the historical process.

The second aspect of the means by which God participates in history refers to the two-fold action when a new stage of development starts within a worn-out civilization without any new potentials left to actualize. Shoghi Effendi notes while one historical process is the death agonies of an old world order,

The second proclaims the birth pangs of an Order, divine and redemptive, that will *inevitably* supplant the former, and within Whose administrative structure *an embryonic civilization*, incomparable and world-embracing, is imperceptibly maturing. The one is being rolled up, and is crashing in oppression, bloodshed, and ruin. The other opens up vistas of a justice, a unity, a peace, a culture, such as no age has ever seen. [PDC 17, emphasis added]

In other words, two historical processes operate at the same time — a degenerating process of the old order of society and, growing within it, (Toynbee's "chrysalis" and "internal proletariat") a new revelation and its concomitant civilization. As the old civilization declines, the vigor of the new revelation and world order increases until it is established.³⁹ The new civilization will be better able to meet the challenges of the next stage of human development.

Finally, the means by which history advances is through the expansion of the social order, i.e. growing inclusivity. Shoghi Effendi states,

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. *Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation* have been successively attempted and fully established. *World unity is the goal* towards which a harassed

humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships. [WOB 202, emphasis added]

In other words, social units show an increase in the number and variety of people who are included as 'one of us' or even seen as 'fully human.' Conversely, the number of people who are considered as irredeemably 'other' are reduced. This must happen on an individual and collective level.

To reach the next, i.e. global stage of historical development, we must recognize that "nation-building has come to an end" at least in the traditional sense and it is now time to concentrate our efforts on building a global federal commonwealth united by "one common faith." This involves numerous and radical changes in personal and collective self-image and self-definition; in the expansion of spiritual capacity; in personal and societal ethical standards; political and social world-views and practices; and in a re-alignment of our loyalties vis-à-vis national state and the world. However, we must not think this is necessarily a single straight-forward process especially in the contemporary world when two processes are at work.

6: The Metaphysical Foundations of the Bahá'í Grand Narrative

The Bahá'í grand narrative of world history is grounded in the metaphysical and ontological teachings embedded in the Bahá'í Writings. The reason for this is clear: history is a part of the phenomenal world created by God and the metaphysical and ontological principles laid down in the Writings are the pre-conditions that inform and shape everything that exists or happens in the phenomenal world. Consequently, the historical process is necessarily linked to the appropriate metaphysical

and ontological principles or pre-conditions. For that reason the most complete form of a grand narrative of world history is one capable of connecting the metaphysical foundations with the actual historical processes. This give us the greatest possible understanding we can obtain within the inherent epistemological limits of humankind. It also increases logical coherence because it contains within itself all the metaphysical principles needed to justify its own arguments, inferences and conclusions. Only three other metanarratives attempt such comprehensiveness: Hegel and Marx, and to a lesser degree Toynbee.

The metaphysical foundation of the Bahá'í grand narrative is the existence of God as the “*the Creator of earth and heaven*” [ESW 40], “*the Sustainer*” [TB 144] of all that exists. This has at least five important consequences. First, the phenomenal world is intentional, i.e. it is intentionally brought into existence by an act of God's Will:

Through His world-pervading Will He hath brought into being all created things ... All that is in heaven and all that is in the earth have come to exist at His bidding, and by His Will all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being. [GWB 318]

It is important to notice that God intended, i.e. wanted the phenomenal world to exist because He loved it: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states “*The cause of the creation of the phenomenal world is love*” [PUP 297] which also suggests that by virtue of God's love, creation, the phenomenal world has inherent value. This, in turn, establishes that in the Bahá'í grand narrative, at least some values are objective and real, and that ethical subjectivism does not universally apply. It also means that Hume's Guillotine — the impossibility of getting from a description to a prescription — does not work with the Bahá'í metanarrative because at least some values are inherent in phenomenal things.

What we also learn from the pervasiveness of the divine Will is that the phenomenal world cannot explain itself in strictly phenomenal terms – as materialist and atheist systems require – but must be referenced to something that is beyond it in capacity and power and is unavoidable. Any attempt to explain physical nature by strictly physical means ends in an infinite regress since any alleged ‘final’ explanation lapses into an infinite sequence of physical causes. Bahá'u'lláh also speaks of “*the Divine Will that pervadeth all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth*” [GWB 5] and notes that “*Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things*” [GWB 335, emphasis added]. Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to “*the divine breath which animates and pervades all things*” [PUP 58]. Bahá'u'lláh also states,

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. [GWB 177]

Already at this point it is clear that the existence of a creator God Whose Will permeates all things will have a dramatic effect on how we contextualize and write world history. Whether or not human history is contextualized in a theistic, atheistic or agnostic way matters because the kind of world-view we espouse – either consciously or unconsciously – contextualizes our thinking and, thereby, influences our judgments about values, human nature, motivations, actions, events, society, politics, justice and truth to name only a few. Our understanding, evaluation and presentation of lives or events will be dramatically different if contextualized by an indifferent world of matter, random mutations and struggle for survival or by a world in which there are intentions, purpose, order and even love for our existence.⁴⁰ For example, the nature of the Bahá'í grand narrative will be in sharp contrast to the

atheist Marxist grand narrative or agnostic grand narrative by the McNeil's *The Human Web: A Birds-Eye View of World History*.⁴¹ Different questions will arise for historians such as 'What is God's intention or desire in creation?'; 'How is this intention made known to us?'; 'How do we best meet this intention?'; 'What kind of values are implicit in this intention?' Furthermore, different events or kinds of events will be important, less important or unimportant depending on the metaphysical context.

It also follows logically that a phenomenal world with a purpose allows us to evaluate, prioritize, judge and interpret historical events and persons in light of that purpose which is objectively embodied in reality. This distinguishes the Bahá'í grand narrative from those like Marxism which attempts to explain world history in strictly immanent, i.e. non-transcendental and materialist terms. The problem is that without an objective standard by which to render evaluations, historical understanding ultimately becomes an exercise in personal and collective subjectivity and preferences. Furthermore, the context we choose also affects the kinds of evidence we are or are not willing to accept; the kind of explanations or possibilities we are willing to explore; the interpretation of events, actions and developments; the conclusions and judgments we draw and the values by which we draw them; the delineation of meaning; and the attitudes with which we approach our material. With the possible exception of chronicles, i.e. simple lists of events or objects, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to write any kind of history without these factors coming into play to one degree or another. It is also clear that even the effort to avoid metaphysics and ontology in history writing lands us in an alternate metaphysics.

It might be argued that historians do not — or should not — mix the study of history with any school of metaphysics and its theological implications. However, the problem with this position is that we cannot avoid taking metaphysical — and

implicitly, theological – standpoints no matter what we do when studying history. It is obvious that empiricism, positivism, the scientific method et al. do not avoid metaphysics but merely assert a different kind of metaphysics and the implicit theologies or a-theologies. Each of the following propositions is metaphysical – and implicitly a-theological – to the core: (1) ‘There is no, or we can detect no, transcendently originated purpose in the cosmos,’ (2) ‘The only valid and decisive evidence is physical/material evidence’ that is the same for all viewers; (3) ‘We seek only facts in history.’ The first two propositions are manifestly metaphysical in nature and the second is obviously self-refuting. No valid material evidence that such is the case can be produced – even in theory. The third statement is logically circular because those who support it will only accept material evidence as ‘facts’ to begin with. The argument that historians must reject ‘miracles’ i.e. divine involvement in history is also problematic – but only if we accept Hume’s definition of miracles violating the laws of nature.⁴² If, on the other hand, we define miracles statistically, like quantum theory, we would say that a miracle is an event of an extremely low order of probability.⁴³ Being highly improbable and being absolutely impossible are two different things – and obviously a miracle is a highly improbable event. In other words, the argument that a Bahá'í grand narrative contaminates history with metaphysics and theology is not in itself a valid reason to reject it because any objection inescapably makes the same ‘error’ of at least implicitly invoking metaphysics.

The second consequence of God’s role as Creator and Sustainer is that the Bahá'í metanarrative connects human history to natural history and the evolution of the universe. In other words, mankind’s history is an intrinsic part of the “divine milieu”⁴⁴ as Teilhard de Chardin calls it and humankind is not as an accidental outcome of random mutations or chemical processes. Rather, humanity is a necessary goal of cosmic history.⁴⁵ As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

Moreover, it is necessary that the signs of the perfections of the spirit appear in this world, that the realm of creation may bring forth endless fruits, and that this body of the contingent world may receive life and manifest the divine bounties ... So, for example, the rays of the sun must shine upon the earth and its heat must nurture all earthly beings; if the rays and heat of the sun were not to reach the earth, it would remain idle and desolate and its development would be arrested. Likewise, were the perfections of the spirit not to appear in this world, it would become dark and wholly animalistic. It is through the appearance of the spirit in the material body that this world is illumined ... If man did not exist, if the perfections of the spirit were not manifested and the light of the mind were not shining in this world, it would be like a body without a spirit. By another token, this world is even as a tree and man as the fruit; without the fruit the tree would be of no use.
[SAQ ch.52]

We hardly need mention that the Writings support the concept of intelligent design of the phenomenal world. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,

This composition and arrangement arose, through the wisdom of God and His ancient might, from one natural order. Thus, as this composition and combination has been produced according to a natural order, with perfect soundness, following a consummate wisdom, and subject to a universal law, it is clear that it is a divine creation and not an accidental composition and arrangement. [SAQ ch.47]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also speaks of the “*the mysteries and creative purposes hidden within the phenomenal world*” [PUP 74]. Because the phenomenal world is an intentional creation of God, it is inherently imbued with a purpose, i.e. God’s purpose which is

the final cause of creation itself. The final cause directs or guides the proximate causes — the material, efficient and formal causes [SAQ ch.80]⁴⁶ — so that they harmonize with the final cause.

The third consequence of God's role as Creator concerns purpose. If creation is intended by God, it has a purpose. If something has a purpose — especially God's purpose — it has intrinsic value by which to judge whether a thing and/or event supports or opposes the divine purpose. Furthermore, because it has intrinsic value, it also has meaning or significance or importance for thought and action. This situation is noteworthy for grand narratives of world history because it implies that human history is not embedded in a fortuitous and essentially chaotic universe but, rather, is part of a universe with a final cause, a purpose, value and meaning. In other words, history takes place in a "divine milieu,"⁴⁷ in an environment actualized and fashioned by God's presence through His divine Will and signs of His ubiquitous presence. Showing how at least some of the major events of world history fit into and exemplify the divine signs either by their presence or indirectly by their absence is one of the challenges of the Bahá'í grand narrative.

When metahistorical studies are contextualized by a "divine milieu," the next logical step is to discover what this purpose is and how it is reflected in human history. Our knowledge of purpose, value and meaning which comes primarily through the Manifestations, provides the standards or criteria by which to evaluate the importance of historical events. Grand narratives that omit the intrinsic and objectively real purpose, value and meaning of historical developments become untenable since, in effect, they are distorting history by errors of omission. For example, the Bahá'í Writings say that the final goal of human history is the unification of mankind, from which it logically follows that it is unsound and short-sighted to neglect this information in interpreting and evaluating historical persons and/or events. Shoghi Effendi makes such a judgment when he

says, that “Nation-building has come to an end” [WOB 202], a statement which, in effect, discourages “nation building” as a side-line of contemporary political action.⁴⁸

The fourth consequences of God’s act(s) of creation is that value is not only innate to all existence but is also objectively real and not merely a personally subjective or even socially subjective phenomenon. In other words, the Writings espouse value realism, i.e. the belief that at least some values – ethical or otherwise – do not depend on human observers, i.e. they are not subjective individually or socially. At least some values are objective, established in the natural world by the presence of the signs and Names of God [SAQ ch.50]. The objectivity of these values is confirmed by Shoghi Effendi who states that all the Manifestations assert the “eternal verities” [PDC 108] in each dispensation. Such “verities” are “eternal” precisely because they endure and are objectively real, i.e. not dependent on human opinion either individual or collective. The manner in which these “verities” are applied diverges among dispensations but the “verities” themselves do not. We might characterize this situation as ‘theme and variations’ or, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, *“truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different”* [PT 128]. The application of these values such as the nature of the good, also varies with the level of creation. For the plants, animals and humans, the value is growth to its highest possible condition but ‘growth,’ while essentially the same in all cases has different attributes in a plant and a human. In other words, nature and the human history embedded in it, are value-laden and have been so from the earliest beginnings of the phenomenal world. This implies that the struggles of history are unconscious or conscious efforts to attain the appropriate good. World history has an objective ethical dimension.

A fifth consequence of divine creation is that the historical process is essentially rational insofar as it is mandated by the “invisible yet rational God” [WOB 112]. Thus, it is divinely endowed with an innate purpose or goal and a correlated means of achieving this goal, i.e. the establishment of a global federal

commonwealth united in “one common faith” achieved with the guidance of the successive Manifestations of God and the actualization of humanity’s intellectual and spiritual potentials. For this reason the holy Manifestations of God appear in the human world. They come to

educate and illuminate mankind, to bestow spiritual susceptibilities, to quicken inner perceptions and thereby adorn the reality of man – the human temple – with divine graces. [PUP 330]

Bahá'u'lláh explains the necessity for an orderly development in history:

Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity. Consider the sun. How feeble its rays the moment it appeareth above the horizon. How gradually its warmth and potency increase as it approacheth its zenith, enabling meanwhile all created things to adapt themselves to the growing intensity of its light ... Were it, all of a sudden, to manifest the energies latent within it, it would, no doubt, cause injury to all created things In like manner, if the Sun of Truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed; for men's hearts would neither sustain the intensity of its revelation, nor be able to mirror forth the radiance of its light. Dismayed and overpowered, they would cease to exist. [GWB 87]

The divine Manifestations arrive in succession to inaugurate new dispensations, i.e. new steps towards the ultimate goal of world unity when humankind is socially, intellectually and spiritually ready to take the next step. This sequential order is

rational in two senses of the word. First, it represents a 'natural' or 'organic' rationality in which each step is the fulfillment of the appropriate potentials (for the goal) of the previous step and the preparation for the actualization of the next stage. The underlying reason for each step is that it facilitates reaching the goal or final cause in an orderly manner. Second, the same principle applies in logical reasoning; each step in a chain of logical inferences must be the necessary and sufficient condition for the next inference.⁴⁹ Hegel's belief that the historical process functioned dialectically may have been mistaken, but his insight that there is an underlying rational sequence in history agrees with the Bahá'í Writings. Science also shows that the cosmic process itself is rational and orderly insofar as science is based on the observation that the universe works by means of classical and statistical laws and regularities.

We hasten yet again to add that the teleological and rational nature of the historical process does not necessarily deny individual free will. Our collective goal is pre-determined – the world commonwealth and the actualization of human potentials – but this does not pre-determine any of our personal decisions for good or bad. Morally speaking the individual remains free to make whatever choices s/he wants:

Certain matters are subject to the free will of man, such as acting with justice and fairness, or injustice and iniquity – in other words, the choice of good or evil actions. It is clear and evident that the will of man figures greatly in these actions ... he is free in the choice of good and evil actions, and it is of his own accord that he performs them ... All these deeds and actions are under his own control, and he is therefore accountable for them. [SAQ ch.70]

In other words, individual and collective free will operates within the context of the teleological historical process. To put it another way, God has determined the ultimate goal of the historical process insofar as He has endowed humanity with the

potentials to work towards this goal, but we are personally and collectively free to decide whether or not to strive for this goal and by what means. Furthermore, free will also means that we are free to do evil or to be “perverse.”

His purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward and perverse. [GWB 70, emphasis added]

God also gives us free will so that the “pure in spirit” may be differentiated from “the wayward and the perverse” by means of their own free moral choices.

The issue of free will inevitably raises the problem of evil. Before proceeding, two points must be noted. First, both good and evil acts require choices, i.e. they must be conscious and intentional. We cannot claim to have acted virtuously because an involuntary arm spasm caused us to swerve and avoid hitting a man collapsed on the road in front our car. Nor can we claim a baby committed an evil act if it accidentally poked and blinded us in one eye. For this reason, natural disasters are not evil since nature is not conscious and cannot form intentions. Second, without the potential of choosing evil, our will would not really be free. Indeed, if we were only allowed to do good deeds, we would be robots or zombies without consciousness, intention, choice and action. In short, we would not be human beings and God's creation would lack purpose. True freedom requires the right to do wrong. The Universal House of Justice explains,

Bahá'u'lláh also raises the possibility that possessing free will, human beings may well commit evil and “wittingly” break “His law.” By the exercise of his free will, man either affirms his spiritual purpose in life or chooses to perpetuate evil by living below his highest station. The question is asked: “Is such

a behaviour to be attributed to God, or to their proper selves?” And [Bahá’u’lláh] concludes: Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves [MUHJ63 663].

Genuine evil, i.e. malicious criminal acts — not tragic accidents, oversights, good intentions gone wrong and results of ignorance — is caused, and can only be caused by, human beings. Along with other factors such as unforeseeable natural disasters, tragic accidents and good intentions gone wrong, evil is the source of the apparent irrationality of history. However, God does not allow man-made anarchy and crime — or even natural disasters — to divert the historical process from its ultimate goal. Even those who disobey and defy God will eventually discover that as the Qur’an says, “*they plotted, and God plotted; and God is the best of plotters.*”⁵⁰ As the Báb states, “*All are His servants and all abide by His bidding!*” [SWB 216, emphasis added] In short, even their opposition will eventually be made to serve God’s purpose. This is reminiscent of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in which God allows free will to Satan and his fallen angels and uses their evil actions as an opportunity to bring out greater good.⁵¹ The same idea underlies Hegel’s concept of “the cunning of reason ... [which] sets the passions to work for itself.”⁵² Bahá’ís have a concrete example of this in our own history. The IRI sought to extirpate the Bahá’í Faith but by driving many Bahá’ís out of Iran, it effectively spread the Faith into more countries than ever before.

We should point out in passing that the Báb’s teaching forms the basis of a Bahá’í theodicy, i.e. an explanation of evil and its role in a divinely created universe. Mankind has freedom to do ill, but God has the power to use evils for greater good. This preserves free will in mankind and assures the advancement of humankind. Unfortunately, we shall not be able to advance this topic at this time.

7: Essentialism and the Bahá'í Grand Narrative

The Bahá'í Writings and the metanarrative that grows out of them support essentialism, i.e. the philosophical view that all things have specific nature and attributes that distinguish them from other things in a real and objective way. According to the Writings, all things have an essence, among them God [SAQ ch.37]; “*all created things*” [SWAB 111]; the human soul [GWB 159]; humankind [SWAB 184]; justice [GWB 167]; beauty [GWB 321]; species of living things [GWB 300]; truth [GWB 328]; religion [PUP 344]; “*this new age*” [PUP 304]; “*existence*” [SWAB 157] and the spirit [SWAB 167]. These references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realise that such phrases as “inmost reality”; “the realities of,” the “inner reality,” and “inner realities” also refer to the essence of things.⁵³ As we shall demonstrate below, essentialism is the logical and ontological foundation of the doctrine of progressive revelation.

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, essences cannot be known directly and immediately by intuitive insight but can be known only indirectly by studying their actualized attributes or qualities:

As our knowledge of things, even of created and limited ones, is of their attributes and not of their essence, how then can it be possible to understand in its essence the unbounded Reality of the Divinity? For the inner essence of a thing can never be known, only its attributes ... Thus everything is known by its attributes and not by its essence: Even though the human mind encompasses all things, and all outward things are in turn encompassed by it, yet the latter are unknown with regard to their essence and can only be known with regard to their attributes ... That is, as created things can only be known through their attributes and not in their essence, the reality of the Divinity, too, must be unknown with regard to its essence and known only with respect to its attributes. [SAQ ch.59]

The principle of knowledge by attributes even applies to God Whose attributes are made known to us by the Manifestations. These revelations are basis for reasoning about God.

Furthermore, there are two kinds of attributes — essential and accidental. Essential attributes are those that a thing must have to be the kind of thing it is e.g. three wheels to be a tricycle. Accidental attributes are those which are “*non-essential*” [TAB3 562] as illustrated in the statement that “*that which is changeable is accidental, evanescent*” [PUP 416]. The tricycle’s color can be changed and, therefore, may be seen as “evanescent” but the necessity of three wheels is permanent or essential. God, of course, has no accidental attributes since that would deny His unchangeable nature and perfect unity.

The distinction between essential and accidental attributes is the metaphysical foundation for progressive revelation. Writing about these two aspects of the divine teachings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states,

Each one of the divine religions has established two kinds of ordinances: the essential and the accidental. The essential ordinances rest upon the firm, unchanging, eternal foundations of the Word itself. They concern spiritualities, seek to stabilize morals, awaken intuitive susceptibilities, reveal the knowledge of God and inculcate the love of all mankind. The accidental laws concern the administration of outer human actions and relations, establishing rules and regulations requisite for the world of bodies and their control. These are ever subject to change and supersedure according to exigencies of time, place and condition. [PUP 338, emphasis added]

Elsewhere ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares,

We must remember that these changing laws are not the essentials; they are the accidentals of religion. The

essential ordinances established by a Manifestation of God are spiritual; they concern moralities, the ethical development of man and faith in God. They are ideal and necessarily permanent – expressions of the one foundation and not amenable to change or transformation. Therefore, the fundamental basis of the revealed religion of God is immutable, unchanging throughout the centuries, not subject to the varying conditions of the human world. [PUP 365]

Shoghi Effendi refers to this distinction between the essential and the accidental when he discusses the permanent “eternal verities” that underlie all religions in contrast to the temporary “nonessential and spurious in their teachings” [PDC 108]. In a very apt metaphor, one author calls these “eternal verities” the “golden core”⁵⁴ of religion which is different from the accidental adaptations to a particular time and place. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time” [PUP 106]. Moreover, he adds,

The second division comprises laws and institutions which provide for human needs and conditions according to exigencies of time and place. These are accidental, of no essential importance and should never have been made the cause and source of human contention. [PUP 393, emphasis added]

Here we see how the Bahá'í principle of rejecting religious conflict of any kind is logically justified by its metaphysical basis in the essence/accident distinction. The rejection of religious conflict is not solely a matter of good will towards men but also a matter of logical reasoning.⁵⁵ This also demonstrates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s dictum that “*The world of minds corresponds with the world of hearts*” [PUP 270] insofar as our

good will towards humankind is correlated to rational philosophical principles.

The essence/attribute distinction allows us to avoid the apparent contradiction between the “eternal verities” which are absolute and unchangeable and Shoghi Effendi’s statement that “religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final” [WOB 58; cf. PDC Preface]. The seeming self-contradiction is solved by recalling that the changes affect the accidental or culture-bound attributes of a revelation and not in its permanent inner essence or “eternal verities.” This distinction meets the requirements of both stability and growth. The “eternal verities” provide a stable foundation for knowledge and faith, without which, ethics would be inescapably reduced to subjectivity and preference. The accidental qualities allow — under the guidance of the Manifestation for a specific age — adaptation of the essentials to various cultural conditions.

8: The Ontology of Potentials

Another aspect of the metaphysics underlying the Bahá’í grand narrative of world history is the ontology of potentials which characterizes the nature of created things. The ontology of potentials — which has its roots in Aristotle⁵⁶ — states that (1) all things are characterized or defined by particular set of potentials or changes they can or cannot undergo; (2) this set of potentials is their essence as a member of a species or group and as a unique individual within that group; (3) all things seek to actualize their potentials to an optimal degree illustrating thereby the principle of perfectibility which is especially true of the human soul [PT 85]. This principle is at work in the doctrine of progressive revelation which depends on continual progress in our self-actualization to operate. Let us examine an example of these ideas. At birth, a puppy has a certain set of potentials that make it (a) a member of the dog species and (b) a specific set of potentials that make it a particular puppy. No matter

what happens, it has no potentials to become a grasshopper or a duck. No amount of tinkering with the puppy's environment and education can change this. During its life-time, a dog can actualize its potentials for protection, playing Frisbee and Flyball and obeying certain commands. However, few if any beings — dogs or humans — exist long enough to actualize their full potentials for which reason unactualized attributes and potentials are necessary aspects of their essence. In that sense, there is a mystery in all created beings.

The Writings make it clear that potentials are not small physical 'things' embedded in an entity like raisins in a bun.⁵⁷ According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá potentials are present but not visible or apparent: "*from the beginning of its formation, all of these [branches and leaves] existed potentially, albeit invisibly, in the seed*" [SAQ ch.51]. Elsewhere he states,

One of the functions of the sun is to quicken and reveal the hidden realities of the kingdoms of existence. Through the light and heat of the great central luminary, all that is potential in the earth is awakened and comes forth into the realm of the visible. [PUP 74, emphasis added; cf. PUP 186]

The Writings reject strict empiricism in which being real is equivalent to being perceptible [SAQ ch.16], and assert the existence of "*intellectual realities*" which "*do not exist outwardly ... that is to say, intellectual realities which are not sensible, and which have no outward existence*" [PUP 186, emphasis added]. Furthermore, since potentials are an aspect of an entity's essence, and the essence of things is not available for direct human knowledge [SAQ ch.74] it seems to follow that, like essences, the potentials of things are known by their qualities or attributes, i.e. by their effects in the world. In themselves they are not unperceivable — although their effects may be well known and predictable. In the sciences, the subject of non-sensible and unpredictable potentials, i.e. hidden, undetectable possibilities is covered by the subject of 'emergence.' For

example, nothing in oxygen and hydrogen atoms provides empirical evidence that the combination of these atoms, i.e. water, will (1) be transparent; (2) be a liquid and (3) will expand when cooled below 4 degrees C unlike all other materials. This and other examples of emergence – the symmetrical and fractal based patterns of snowflakes for example – support the Bahá'í view of the reality of potentials.

The ontology of potentials is essential to the Bahá'í grand narrative insofar as it grounds the concept of the perfectibility of man which is itself essential to the doctrine of progressive revelation. According to Bahá'u'lláh we must “*Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom*” [GWB 259]. Bahá'u'lláh informs us that only education can actualize these gem-like potentials and make them visible, and, thereby allow us to fulfill His command that “*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214]. It is important to notice the universal and categorical term “all” which tells us there are no exceptions to this purpose. The actualization of potentials and most especially the actualization of the higher spiritual potentials are vital to the goal of the unification of humankind. Only by striving for self-transcendence and self-overcoming can this goal be reached [PUP 143].

Only by improving spiritually as well as materially can we make any real progress, and become perfect beings. It was in order to bring this spiritual life and light into the world that all the great Teachers have appeared. They came so that the Sun of Truth might be manifested, and shine in the hearts of men, and that through its wondrous power men might attain unto Everlasting Light. [PT 63]

In this passage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá connects the three concepts of spiritual and material progress with the doctrine of progressive revelation as initiated and guided by God’s Manifestations.

The ontology of potentials is the basis of an objective standard by which to measure human progress, i.e. the degree to which potentials have been actualized in any given individual or society. In regards to individuals — including ourselves — ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

The only real difference that exists between people is that they are at various stages of development. Some are imperfect — these must be brought to perfection. Some are asleep — they must be awakened; some are negligent — they must be roused; but one and all are the children of God. Love them all with your whole heart; no one is a stranger to the other, all are friends. [PT 171]

This can be applied not only to individuals who, for whatever reason, have not actualized their potentials but also to cultures and nations, as seen in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s question about Persia: “*Must she now, for this contemptible sloth, this failure to struggle, this utter ignorance, be accounted the most backward of nations?*” [SDC 8] Similarly, he says of Paris, and by extension, the West, that “*her spiritual progress is far behind that of her material civilization*” [PT 27]. Shoghi Effendi refers to “backward peoples” [UD 25] in various parts of the world. The objective standard by which to assess progress is the degree to which this person, or this culture have actualized or expanded the actualization of their latent potentials. From a Bahá'í perspective, the answer seems clear: advanced individuals or cultures are those which have actualized the most potentials and provided more opportunities for more people to develop their potentials, i.e. their “inestimable gems.”

However, it must be emphasized that the actualization of potentials must not be one-sided, especially in the materialist direction:

I want to make you understand that material progress and spiritual progress are two very different things, and that only if material progress goes hand in hand with

spirituality can any real progress come about ... The laws of God may be likened unto the soul and material progress unto the body. If the body was not animated by the soul, it would cease to exist. It is my earnest prayer that spirituality may ever grow and increase in the world, so that customs may become enlightened and peace and concord may be established. [PT 108]

In other words, progress consists of the actualization of our material, intellectual and above all our spiritual potentials to the greatest degree possible in the greatest possible number of people. Of course, in light of the final goal of world history, we are all spiritually and/or materially “backward,” albeit not necessarily in equal measure.

9: Controversies about Grand Narratives

Grand narratives are sharply criticized and strenuously rejected by contemporary historians, postmodern philosophers and cultural studies scholars. Since the Bahá’í Writings explicitly present a grand narrative, it is, in my view, imperative to understand at least some of these critiques and the possible answers — especially those from the Bahá’í Writings. Such knowledge is not only valuable to Bahá’ís engaged in teaching or apologetics but also to scholars of comparative religion and philosophy.

Ever since the publication of Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1919) and Toynbee’s *A Study of History* (1934–1961) grand narratives have been a highly controversial subject among philosophers, historians and cultural studies scholars. Among the philosophers, Karl Popper, an influential philosopher of science, was the most persistent and systematic opponent who not only rejected grand narratives as intellectually mistaken but also as a potent source of evil. In *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957) and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1962) Popper strives to undermine the philosophical underpinnings which

make grand narratives possible. In so doing, he anticipates most of the postmodernist — e.g. Lyotard — critiques about the “totalization”⁵⁸ and “terrorism”⁵⁹ supposedly inflicted by metanarratives.

In *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Popper blames metanarratives from Plato to Hegel and Marx for the rise of totalitarian regimes in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. In fact, he dedicated *The Poverty of Historicism* to all those who “fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.”⁶⁰ His objection to grand narratives and the implied ability to predict — or identify possible or probable developments — is that grand narratives lead to all the associated ills of totalitarianism: omnipresent state planning; *gleichschaltung*, i.e. an enforced coordination of all aspects of public and private life; and the reduction of the individual to a mere means or tool of the state. For Popper grand narratives have no redeeming features.

According to Popper, grand narratives (although the term had not yet been invented) are a part of “historicism” which he defines as

an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.⁶¹

In Popper’s view, there are no laws manifested in history, which means, in effect, there are no regularities, patterns or trends to be seen and, therefore, no grand narratives to be established. Therefore, “History has no meaning.”⁶² Because it has “no meaning” it has no goals or even a general direction, i.e. is not teleological. He continues, saying that, “There is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life.”⁶³ With this

statement, Popper, like the postmodernists, asserts a nominalistic view of history by breaking up all concepts of a universal ‘human history’ into a multitude of smaller individual histories of localities, nations and so on. Toynbee aptly describes Popper’s view as “antinomian”⁶⁴ insofar as the historical process is not subject to any regularity or law.

In light of our foregoing discussion of the Bahá’í grand narrative, the clash between the Bahá’í teachings and Popper’s views are inescapable. However, in our view, none of Popper’s critiques of metanarratives are especially salient.

The first weakness is blatant self-contradiction at the most fundamental level: to make his complaint about ‘historicism’ and grand narratives, Popper indulges in ‘historicism’ himself. He claims that there are no predictable patterns in history and yet he asserts the existence of such patterns on the basis of historical events in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Communist Russia and then predicts that such grand narratives necessarily and inevitably lead to totalitarian states. If history has no pattern and cannot be predicted, on what basis does he make his prediction? And without evidence, i.e. patterns or laws – or even the possibility of evidence – why should we accept his word? On this score, Popper’s argument is logically flawed and unpersuasive.

There is a second weakness, namely, if history is too complex to allow grand generalizations or grand narratives of history, then there is no basis for Popper’s thesis that history lacks order and is too complex to be known. How could he know this if history is too complex to be knowable? Such a judgment already pre-supposes a complete knowledge of history – something he says is beyond us. The most he can say is that he can discover no order – but it does not logically follow therefrom that no order exists. Nor is his inability to find an order in history logically sufficient to reject all other attempts to disclose such order and meaning. In short, Popper *asserts* but he does *not prove*.

A third weakness is that Popper's denial of meaning in history is, in effect, no more than a proposal for a different meaning of history, i.e. for an alternate grand narrative of the historical process even though his argument supposedly forbids metanarratives. To say that human actions lack order and meaning and exhibit no value or purpose is, in effect, an alternative interpretation of history, albeit a negative one. This is no logical caprice such as claiming that 'nothing' is 'something.' Popper's negative metanarrative resembles positive metanarratives insofar they both embed a certain set of beliefs, principles and values and both prohibit certain other views. In short, both function in a similar manner. Popper's grand narrative endorses or at least encourages a particular set of beliefs and values, i.e. those usually associated with atheist secular humanism which recognizes humankind as the only source of values and only the physical as real.

Despite his arguments against grand narratives, Popper still feels the need for some sensed of meaning in history: "Although history has no ends, we can *impose these ends* of ours upon it; and although history has no meaning, *we can give it a meaning*."⁶⁵ Unfortunately, there is an obvious problem here. If we know that the historical process is intrinsically chaotic and complex beyond all human understanding, it is difficult to see how we can successfully "impose" our own order on it. Either this man-made order is entirely fictional and, therefore, dubious, or it reflects or connects to something real in the historical process. However, in the latter case Popper's rejection of grand narratives would be at least partially false, i.e. there is at least some genuine order we can connect with.

The fourth – and the most important problem with Popper's theories – is clear by reference to the Bahá'í Writings: history is turbulent and sometimes even chaotic but there is one constant throughout: human nature. The essential oneness of human nature is the field on which all the historical turmoil plays out. Whatever the historical events, the responses are inevitably shaped and limited by human nature itself. As W.H.

Walsh notes, “history is properly concerned with human experiences,”⁶⁶ adding that “History is intelligible ... because it is a manifestation of mind.”⁶⁷ History is constituted by our understandings of and reactions to what we experience. R.G. Collingwood expresses the same idea as follows: “For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it.”⁶⁸ Thought, “the object to be discovered” is also shaped and limited by human nature no less than action. The conclusion is inescapable: the human mind — or the “rational soul” as the Bahá’í Writings call it — is the underlying common denominator that unifies all the various histories of humankind. W.H. Walsh concludes that “[A] fundamental set of generalizations, belonging to the science of human nature, is presupposed in all historical work.”⁶⁹

The unity of human nature is a foundational principle of the Bahá’í Writings. It is most obviously evident at the physical level. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

When we observe the human world, we find various collective expressions of unity therein. For instance, man is distinguished from the animal by his degree, or kingdom. This comprehensive distinction includes all the posterity of Adam and constitutes one great household or human family, which may be considered the fundamental or physical unity of mankind. [PUP 190, emphasis added]

In other words, human nature as a whole is distinguished from animal nature and, therefore, humans make up one family that illustrates “the physical unity of mankind.” The sciences provide decisive evidence for this “physical unity.” It is self-evident that medical science, i.e. doctors, surgeons, physiologists and pharmacologists study the same basic texts the world over because our physiological processes and organs are essentially the same regardless of ethnic origins. Moreover, in the 1950’s, humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow established his widely influential⁷⁰ hierarchy of physical, psycho-

social and even spiritual needs which characterize human nature everywhere.⁷¹ All humans have D-needs for survival – air, water, food, shelter, protection, appropriate clothing and opportunities to look after ourselves – and B-needs which we need not to survive but to thrive, to be fulfilled as specifically human individuals. Among these needs are purpose and meaning, friendship and appreciation.

Further evidence for the essential oneness of mankind comes from anthropology and cognitive science. As noted by prominent anthropologist Donald E Brown in *Human Universals*, “human biology is a key to understanding many human universals.”⁷² In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist, explores the philosophical history leading to the rejection of the concept of a universal human nature. Based on but also extending the work of Donald Brown, he lists over three hundred traits as universal.⁷³

The Bahá'í Writings also inform us that the universal attributes of humankind are not only physical but also spiritual and intellectual:

The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one and the same thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is called the rational soul, encompasses all things and as far as human capacity permits. [SAQ ch.55]

The message is clear: regardless of culture, time, place or circumstance, all people share one human nature because they all have a rational soul. We also share a higher, spiritual nature and a lower animal nature which the higher nature must control. In addition, we all possess “*spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 339] which must be cultivated in order to make spiritual progress possible. Since there is a universal human nature, it must be

manifested in historical human actions. Indeed, a universal ethic is also possible because of our universal human nature insofar as at least some ethical rules apply to everyone at all times and in all places. God being the creator of human nature, means that no one is better qualified than He to establish what this ethic is. As Shoghi Effendi notes, all the Manifestations teach the “eternal verities” [PDC 107]. Consequently, objective and cross-cultural moral standards exist across all cultures, places, times and circumstances.

Not only is human nature universal, it is also stable over time, i.e. it is historically stable. This is evident in Shoghi Effendi’s statement that the successive Manifestations “restate the eternal verities” [PDC 108] over the course of human history. If human nature changed, then the “eternal verities” would not be relevant through historical changes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, reinforces this point when, writing of evolution, he says that man’s “*species and essence undergo no change*” [SAQ 183]. In short, human nature is constant. The actualization of hidden and latent potentials is not, of course, a change in nature but a fulfillment or completion of our nature. Such actualization of potentials is what occurs during the historical process that, in the Bahá’í grand narrative, culminates in a world-wide federal commonwealth united by “one common faith.”

Another criticism of grand narratives is that they do not follow the methods of ‘scientific history.’ The demand for ‘scientific history’ is itself problematic and, therefore, weak. It is hard to know what this demand is supposed to mean. Clearly, grand narratives cannot follow the methods of the experimental sciences though it can follow the scientific method of forming a hypothesis, gathering evidence, testing the hypothesis and then arriving at a conclusion. However, as we shall see, the three writers examined by this study — Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin — fulfill the requirements of the scientific method.

However, if by ‘scientific’ we mean limiting all conclusions to what can be directly and literally documented, then R.G.

Collingwood makes the obvious point that history is more than just documentable events and is the history of “the thoughts out of which these events grew?”⁷⁴ Elsewhere he says, history cannot be limited to external events. William H McNeil expresses this issue more dramatically, commenting that “ink-soiled paper does not and never has embraced all the parameters of human life with which historians might appropriately concern themselves.”⁷⁵ William H Dray notes, “For it is surely the historian’s task ... not only to establish the facts, but to *understand* them. And this will involve him in giving explanations.”⁷⁶ Explanations require interpretations and interpretations lead to judgments. He adds,

Application of the evidence criterion to history isn’t contentious: we do not find theorists arguing that history should be written in contravention of the evidence. Nonetheless, to ask *how and to what extent* the evidence should guide historical accounts does permit substantive debate ... The extent to which historical accounts are constrained by the evidence invites consideration of the question of under-determination. *It may be that historical accounts are determined by the evidence to a significantly lesser extent than are scientific accounts; in particular in so far as those historical accounts are interpretive or narrative.*⁷⁷

Other criticisms of grand narratives assert that they require the marginalization of certain knowledge, beliefs, and peoples as individuals or groups. This critique is invalid insofar as the Bahá'í teachings reject the marginalization of people(s) and argue for the essential oneness of mankind. However the marginalization of people(s) is not the same thing as the marginalization of ideas and knowledge-claims. Marginalizing individuals qua individuals cannot be justified but, the entire concept of ‘progress’ which is integral to the Writings (see below) necessitates leaving some knowledge behind as mistaken,

impractical, malevolent or even “*the outcome[s] of human perversity*” [GWB 217] as Bahá’u’lláh says of “a few” religions. The rejection and marginalization of human beings and the rejection and marginalization of ideas, knowledge, beliefs and customs are not at all the same things. Bahá’u’lláh’s foregoing words about some religions as the “outcome[s] of human perversity” demonstrates, the Bahá’í Writings themselves show no hesitation in rejecting certain beliefs as false and superstitious and, in the case of a few religions, even perverse. Indeed, the Writings clearly acknowledge the existence of “error” [SAQ ch.46], “*idle fancies and vain imagining*” [ESW 15], “ignorance” [SAQ ch.60], “*heedlessness and superstition*” [PB 95], and even “absurd” [TAF 18] i.e. illogical arguments. Furthermore, Bahá’u’lláh advises us to “*meditate profoundly ...so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns*” [KI 8]. In other words, the Writings clearly assert that not all claims to know the truth are really true, or, conversely, that some views and opinions, no matter how passionately held are simply wrong and must be rejected if humankind is to make progress. Indeed, the whole concept of progress which plays such an essential role in the Writings, means that some knowledge, some beliefs, some practices must be abandoned, i.e. permanently marginalized. Bahá’u’lláh’s assertion that “*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214] virtually requires us to leave behind all those beliefs, attitudes, loyalties and practices that hinder progress, and most notably, those that hinder progress towards the unification of humankind. His statement also requires us to recognize that humanity as a whole shares the same divinely given task.

A final critique of grand narratives is that they artificially impose a pattern or agenda on the historical process. It is difficult to understand this critique since to one degree or another, all histories except, perhaps, the simplest lists of names or events can avoid some ‘imposition’ on their material.

However, even with simple chronologies we cannot avoid some choice of what to include and leave out and, thereby, the judgments and interpretations entailed by such selection. All histories must do this and even more: making choices about what to accept as evidence (documents, oral traditions, eye witnesses, logical deductions); judging importance and relevance; and identifying meanings and implications. Thus, making imposing patterns a special misdeed for grand narratives is an obvious case of special pleading. Imposing an 'agenda' is no unique sin of metanarratives. Nor is it necessarily dishonest or obfuscating if we are open about writing to prove a certain viewpoint. Such statements of intent allow readers to investigate for themselves and form independent judgments. Moreover, criticizing an author like Toynbee for finding religious truths illustrated in history seems hypocritical in light of the respectful reception given to Marxists like Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. Marxism itself is a grand narrative and those who work within the Marxist metanarrative are fleshing out smaller fragments of it. In our view, the common sense attitude to this issue lies with Sebastian Conrad's defense that the concept of world history is, in principle, no less viable than other, more limited, historiographical theories and practices.⁷⁸ Such efforts are not inherently and necessarily flawed and, therefore, cannot be rejected *a priori*.

10: Global Grand Narratives

To help us understand the nature of grand narratives of global history in particular, we must reflect on two interconnected problems — scale and order. All global grand narratives claim that if we study history on a world scale we will be able to observe patterns of that are not visible at sub-global scales. However, this leads to a problem with other historians who work with smaller units of study such as nations. Georg Iggers writes that world historians like Fukuyama and Huntington are not

taken seriously in recent historiography not only because of the political implications of their work but also because they operate on a speculative plane of global history alien to historians who avoid such schemes in their empirical work. However, the developments of past decade and a half have shown that *neither the turn to micro-history nor the older patterns of national and regional history are sufficient for dealing with the transformations that are taking place on a global scale ... it is indisputable that there are processes of modernization taking place before our eyes, most clearly in the scientific, technological and ... economic spheres, and ... [modernization] has transformed societies globally ... [and] must be taken seriously on a world scale.*⁷⁹

Sebastian Conrad makes a similar point arguing that contrary to what opponents⁸⁰ of grand narratives assert,

No unit [local, national, global] of study is inherently superior ... No unit is the one and only true unit of inquiry. What is more, different units direct our attention to different processes. Different units ... are not only different windows on the same subject, but each window allows us to see processes that might not have come into view through another window. The common criticism that the grand narratives get the details wrong is beside the point — they aim at larger processes and trends.⁸¹

In other words, there are some kinds of historical knowledge we can only obtain by taking an expansive, global view. This is not difficult to illustrate. A close sociological study of a single family lets us focus very specifically on individual situations, self-images, familial dynamics, motives and actions among other things. We acquire detailed knowledge of individuals. However, such a narrow study does not tell us much about the

trends and patterns in family life at the regional or even national level. Indeed, at the smaller scale, such knowledge is not available for observation. In statistics it is established that a small sample size is unreliable for drawing general conclusions about very large groups of people because some causal factors, correlations, trends and patterns only become significant when the sample size is sufficiently large. Appropriate sample size also washes out the outliers, those anomalies that can easily distort the knowledge we get from small scale studies. The difference in gathering knowledge at different scales is why historian William H McNeil states, "historian's fixity of attention on national and local affairs is misleading."⁸² Similarly, Sebastian Conrad explains, "Global history thus acknowledges the causal relevance of factors that do not lie within the purview of individuals, nations, and civilizations."⁸³ What the foregoing discussion suggests is that insisting that only one scale or perspective is valid, denies us access to knowledge that may be essential to humankind.

Sebastian Conrad rejects complaints about grand narratives getting factual details wrong as being "beside the point"⁸⁴ because grand narratives "aim at larger processes and trends."⁸⁵ Larger processes or statistical sample sizes are not as sensitive to errors in detail as smaller processes and sample sizes where they can have undue influence on a smaller pool of data. Conrad makes the same point about errors allegedly found in meta-historians like Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler. By itself, the existence of the outlier or detail error is not enough to disprove anything in large scale studies. W.H. Walsh makes the same point by saying that in the sphere of global history "a man can be wrong in detail and sound in essentials."⁸⁶ To assert that an outlier or error invalidates a general trend or pattern or a grand narrative, we must show in each case the reasons why this difference causes a severe distortion in the pattern that has been found. The mere assertion of error is not enough.

We shall now get into more details of the Bahá'í grand narrative in comparing and contrasting them with the work of Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin.

PART II

The Bahá'í Grand Narrative and Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin

Oswald Spengler's two-volume *The Decline of the West* published in Germany in 1918 is one of the best known metanarratives of the 20th Century. Despite the largely academic controversies surrounding this two volume *magnum opus*, it is still widely available in various translations and in both book and e-format which suggests that it still arouses considerable interest. In 1952, H. Stuart Hughes wrote that despite the "bitter invective, icy scorn, urbane mockery or simply pretending that it is not there,"⁸⁷ Spengler's work continues to attract readers and generate "intellectual excitement."⁸⁸ Half a century later, Neil McInnes's article "*The Great Doomsayer*"⁸⁹ provides a cavalcade of the major contemporary thinkers who have been influenced by Spengler, despite his continued poor reputation amongst academics. Among them we find Francis Fukuyama, author of *The End of History* and *The Origins of Political Order*; Hans Robert Jauss, the originator of reception theory; Henry Kissinger; F. Scott Fitzgerald; and Michael Foucault.⁹⁰ Others include Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, Theodor Adorno, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Camille Paglia, Ernest Hemingway and Hans Morgenthau.⁹¹ His far-reaching influence alone makes his ideas worth careful study. Adda B Bozeman notes this need for more careful study in "*Decline of the West? Spengler Reconsidered.*"⁹² W. Reed Smith explains Spengler's and Toynbee's contemporary relevance in his 2009 article "*Megalopolis versus Social Retardation: The Continuing Relevance of the Views of Spengler and Toynbee on the Variability of the Rate of Cultural*

Change.”⁹³ Mehdi Mozafari’s *Globalization and Civilization* also notes Spengler’s wide-ranging influence on contemporary thought.⁹⁴ Neil McInnes points out that if nothing else, “there gradually arose after Spengler a sustained interest in what was variously called the science of civilization, cultural studies and comparative macrosociology.”⁹⁵ A renewed appraisal of Spengler’s continued relevance was published in 2001 by John Farrenkopf, a professor of history and political science.⁹⁶ This curious contrast between Spengler’s negative reception among academic historians and his wide-spread influence among major writers, diplomats and thinkers is something that requires further exploration. Such a serious disconnect suggest that something important is being overlooked in his work. Later, we shall see that the same may be said of Arnold Toynbee.

In outline, Spengler’s theory is clear. The first issue to note is Spengler’s distinction between ‘Culture’ and ‘civilization.’ As such, this distinction does not exist in the Bahá’í Writings. For Spengler, Culture is the phase in which all later civilizations have their start; according to Spengler, “The Civilization is the inevitable destiny of the Culture.”⁹⁷ The transition from Culture to Civilization is “the victory of the inorganic megalopolis over the organic countryside which was henceforward to become spiritually ‘the provinces.’”⁹⁸ W. Reed Smith notes,

The California wine country may still be semi-rural, but it is nevertheless thoroughly megalopolitan in outlook and lifestyle. One can live in rural Mississippi and still be thoroughly megalopolitan in outlook. Indeed, megalopolitanism is a world-view, a way of life; and although it is springing forth from the overgrown urban centers such as New York and Los Angeles, it cannot and should not be misunderstood to be somehow limited to people living within the city limits of the great cities.⁹⁹

Culture contains all the potentials that it and its subsequent civilization can actualize. It is the time of true creativity in all

areas of human endeavor and a time genuinely experienced religiosity. Perhaps the most basic aspect of a culture is its “world-feeling”¹⁰⁰ i.e. its feeling about the nature of reality as, for example, being inherently alive, or inherently sacred or as an image of a greater reality, or, as in materialism, inherently utterly passive or ‘dead.’ This underlying “world-feeling” shapes all of a culture’s artistic, intellectual and practical activities. What Spengler says about mathematics and different theories of number in the following passage is true of everything else:

We find an Indian, an Arabian, a Classical, a Western type of mathematical thought and, corresponding with each, a type of number — each type fundamentally peculiar and unique, *an expression of a specific world-feeling, a symbol having a specific validity which is even capable of scientific definition*, a principle of ordering the Become which reflects the central essence of one and only one soul, viz., the soul of that particular Culture.¹⁰¹

Another important aspect of the “world-feeling” is the “Destiny-idea [in which] the soul reveals its world-longing, its desire to rise into the light, to accomplish and actualize its vocation.”¹⁰² Spengler believes that the eight ‘high cultures’ he has selected possess the “Destiny-idea” to a superlative degree although he admits that “to no man is it entirely alien.”¹⁰³ In other words, both individuals and cultures possess a “Destiny-idea” at least during their growing cultural phases. For Spengler, “world-feeling,” “Destiny-idea” and “prime symbol” are connected.

the Destiny-idea manifests itself in every line of a life. With it alone do we become members of a particular Culture, whose members are *connected by a common world-feeling and a common world-form* derived from it. A deep identity unites the awakening of the soul, its birth into clear existence in the name of a Culture, with the sudden realization of distance and time, *the birth of*

*its outer world through the symbol of extension; and thenceforth this symbol is and remains the prime symbol of that life, imparting to it its specific style and the historical form in which it progressively actualizes its inward possibilities.*¹⁰⁴

The “prime symbol” which is connected to the “world-feeling” and “Destiny-idea” grows out of the intuitions of space and time whose importance has been grossly underestimated by academic historians.¹⁰⁵ For the Classical or Apollonian Greek world, time and space were a single point in the present as illustrated for example in ancient Greek drama. Greek drama required (1) unity of time: the action could take no more time than the duration of the play; (2) unity of space: the action could not require a change of scene; (3) unity of action: there could only be one action/plot with only minimal subplots, if any. Throughout *The Decline of the West*, Spengler shows how Greek culture, e.g. mathematics and art reflected their prime symbol of ‘one-ness.’ Greek philosophy, for example, was heavily focussed on the problems of the one and the many, being and becoming, essence and attribute – all of which are aspects of their prime symbol. Western, or Faustian culture’s prime symbol was “an infinitely wide and profound three dimensional space”¹⁰⁶ as reflected in the invention of calculus, i.e. the mathematics of movement and approaching infinity; in invention of multi-dimensional, i.e. unlimited geometries, and the fugue which is an attempt at infinite complexity in music. The Magian or Arab, Hebrew and Iranian prime symbol is a cavern which exhibit the

“Semitic” primary-dualism which , ever the same under its thousand forms, fills the Magian world. The light shines through the cavern and battlers against the darkness [John i, 5]. Both are Magian substances. Up and down, heaven and earth become powers that have entity and contends with one another.¹⁰⁷

In more general terms, the Magian Cavern is an inherently mysterious place inhabited by enigmatic and shadowy beings whose cryptic struggles are reflected in the sinewy complexities of Arabesques and in the transformations of algebra.

As in the Bahá'í Writings, each culture and civilization lasts about one thousand years the last centuries of which are a hardening of flexible creative culture into a civilization which marks the final phase of its existence. Moreover, each culture is an organic entity that passes through its phases of development without any chance of deviation. In human terms, this process resembles human growth, from birth, to childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood and old age. More commonly, though, Spengler uses the seasonal cycle as his organic analog; here, too, there is no chance of avoiding the inevitable. No act or cultural-political program can deflect this order. The last season — the one in which Spengler locates us — is winter, which is dominated by technology, commercialism and vulgarity. It is in the winter phase that the “Destiny-idea” is “overpowered by matter-of-fact feeling and mechanizing thought.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, most people no longer have any ability to conceive of themselves anything more than physical beings with a super-natural destiny of vocation. They feel soul-less and rootless who confuse being lost with being free. This time of confusion gives rise to a period of “let’s pretend” spirituality or what Spengler today would call ‘new age hocus pocus,’ along with the mock-spirituality of Hollywood supernaturalism intended to entertain. However,

[t]he fact that the latter [pseudo spirituality] is possible at all foreshadows a new and genuine spirit of seeking that declares itself, first quietly, but soon emphatically and openly, in the civilized waking consciousness ... [However] The material of the Second religiousness is simply that of the first, genuine, young religiousness.¹⁰⁹

He also sees the loss of genuine religiosity as a sign of the autumn and winter season, i.e. taking over a culture:

It is this *extinction of living inner religiousness*, which gradually tells upon even the most insignificant element in a man's being, that becomes phenomenal in the historical world-picture at the *turn from the Culture to the Civilization*, the Climacteric of the Culture, as I have already called it, the time of change in which a mankind loses its spiritual fruitfulness for ever, and building takes the place of begetting. *Unfruitfulness* – understanding the word in all its direct seriousness – marks the brain-man of the megalopolis, as the sign of fulfilled destiny, and it is one of the most impressive facts of historical symbolism that the change manifests itself not only *in the extinction of great art, of great courtesy, of great formal thought, of the great style in all things, but also quite carnally in the childlessness and “race-suicide” of the civilized and rootless strata*, phenomenon not peculiar to ourselves but already observed and deplored – and of course not remedied – in Imperial Rome and Imperial China.¹¹⁰

As a civilization approaches its end, it also experiences a “Second Religiousness”¹¹¹ which is marked by a “deep piety.”¹¹² However,

neither in the creations of this piety nor in the form of the Roman Imperium is there anything primary and spontaneous. *Nothing is built up, no idea unfolds itself* – it is only as if a mist cleared off the land and revealed the old forms, uncertainly at first, but presently with increasing distinctness. The material of the Second Religiousness is simply that of the first, genuine, young religiousness – only otherwise experienced and expressed ... finally the whole world of the primitive religion, which had receded before the grand forms of the early faith, returns to the foreground, powerful, in the guise of the *popular syncretism* that is to be found in every Culture at this phase.¹¹³

Because all cultures pass through the same life-cycle in the same seasonal order for roughly the same length of time, the meaning of the word ‘contemporary’ is decisively altered inasmuch as events may be separated by a thousand years, but if they occur at the same phase or season in the life cycle of two cultures, these events are ‘contemporary.’ For example, Spengler sees Julius Caesar and Napoleon as contemporaries because they fulfilled the same basic role at the same point in the seasonal cycle albeit it in different cultures. Both mark the beginning of the winter season of their cultures.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the history of a culture is predictable insofar as the specific phases of development can be foretold as well as the sub-phases, such as the “second Religiousness” or, in the last phases of civilization, “Caesarism” i.e. the rule of strong leaders able to impose their will on society as well as the rule of money. Ironically, Caesarism “grows on the soil of Democracy”¹¹⁵ although it eventually asserts itself over popular will, money or aristocracy. According to Spengler, the West is now in the middle of its winter or civilizational phase.

As cultures harden into the winter of civilization, the “destiny-idea” in individuals is replaced by “matter-of-fact-feeling and mechanizing thought.”¹¹⁶ Spengler does not limit the “Destiny-idea” to any particular race, class, nation or culture. The eight “high Cultures” he mentions are simply the outstanding achievers among humanity. The intuited “Destiny-idea” “manifests itself in every line of a life”¹¹⁷ and connects us by a common world-feeling and a common world-form”¹¹⁸ to the culture in which we live. For Spengler, destiny is more important than external causality because destiny is what we choose to do as opposed to what is forced upon us. Our intuition of time and space becomes “the prime symbol of that [cultural] life, imparting to it its specific style and the historical form in which it progressively actualizes its inward possibilities.”¹¹⁹ The hidden influence of the “prime symbol” shapes all aspects of life in every culture as it actualizes its potentials.

According to Spengler, “High Cultures” are the true focus of historical studies, not nations, races, states or empires. The latter are subunits of what Spengler calls “High Culture”¹²⁰ which are subject to the seasonal cycles. There have been eight major cultures in the past: the Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Mayan/Aztec, Classical Greco-Roman, Arabian (including Jewish and Persian) or Magian, Western or Euro-American. These are “high Cultures.”¹²¹

The group of the high Cultures is not, as a group, an organic unit. That they have happened in just this number, at just these places and times, is, for the human eye, an incident without deeper intelligibility.¹²²

This list demonstrates two important aspects of Spengler’s theory of history. First, not all cultures are “High Cultures” i.e. cultures with a strongly developed “Destiny-idea” and the subsequent unity and strength that grow out of this idea. Second, “High Culture” is not dependent on a biological conception of race as shown by the presence of only one Western or Euro-American High Culture. In fact, Spengler had no use for biological and darwinian concepts of race, and, like Nietzsche, thought of ‘race’ as a matter of character, style and form, and tradition.¹²³ His list includes no African cultures – he does not, of course, think Egyptian culture was Black – because from his perspective no “High Cultures” existed in Africa. As the rest of his list shows, biological race was not a factor in this judgment. His contempt for Hitler – despite the Nazis’ attempt to enlist Spengler as a fore-runner – is wittily summarized by his statement that Germany needs a hero, “not a heroic tenor.”¹²⁴ In regards to the Jews, he viewed the tensions between Jewish and Christians as being about cultural heritage, not blood.

The foregoing examples of Spengler’s method of historical study reveal three important aspects of his work.

First, he unequivocally rejects the linear view of history as a progressive sequence from ancient to modern with its implied superiority of Western culture. He regards this as a distorted view of history.¹²⁵ In Spengler's view, there is no progress in history – cultures simply go through their life-cycle but they are not working towards anything but the actualization of their potentials as their natural goal. The Writings and Spengler are in glaring disagreement about progress as indicated by the Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation and Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*" [GWB 214]. However, this progress is not confined to any one particular culture but – as the 'Amazonian' metaphor of the Bahá'í grand narrative suggests – historical progress is made up of tributary contributions from different cultures at different times. No one culture or people bears the entire burden of making progress. However, the progress made by humankind is objectively real and the Writings set an objective standard for assessing progress in both individuals and cultures: the degree of actualization of inherent physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities. More advanced cultures actualize more potentials in more people than less advanced cultures. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, implicitly applies this standard when he speaks of some peoples and tribes as practicing "*savageries*" [SAQ ch.77] and proceeding to the necessity for education i.e. actualization of the intellectual and spiritual capacities to lift them out of this condition. He asks, rhetorically,

How long shall we drift on the wings of passion and vain desire; how long shall we spend our days like barbarians in the depths of ignorance and abomination? God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it.

[SDC 3, emphasis added]

In contrast, Spengler does not think that any such standards among cultures and civilizations exist and, therefore, there is no such thing as 'progress' in history. He is unable to do so because the monadic nature of each culture and civilization make impossible the application of any common standard of assessment.

Second, Spengler rejects the limitations of 'scientific' history, i.e., the belief that

history joins astronomy and volcanology in being an evidentially but non-experimental discipline ... Nonetheless, to ask how and to what extent the evidence should guide historical accounts does permit substantive debate ... *It may be that historical accounts are determined by the evidence to a significantly lesser extent than are scientific accounts; in particular in so far as those historical accounts are interpretive or narrative.*¹²⁶

Historical understanding based strictly on material evidence is, in Spengler's view, inappropriate and insufficient for dealing with the complexities and depths of human thought, feeling, personal and socio-political action values, religion and culture. Concepts like "world-feeling," "Destiny-idea" and "prime symbol" play an extremely important role in the inner, often unconscious motivation for actions, beliefs and values. That is why, in his view, we also need intuition, empathy and 'einfuehlung'¹²⁷ ('feeling our way into the life and perspective of another being') are necessary in the process of understanding, explaining and interpreting history.¹²⁸ Because history is made by humans, we need not only facts but also assessment and interpretation of facts and their implications. In other words, according to Spengler, the 'hard' basic facts of history are necessary but not sufficient to understand the past that humans make. This conclusion has a major impact on how we view – and write – history.

In regards to historical methodologies, there is a clear convergence — though not full agreement — between the Bahá'í Writings and Spengler. Both agree that by themselves, “materialistic’ methodologies and attitudes,”¹²⁹ i.e. methods and attitudes limited to what can be known via documents or other physical evidence — are insufficient for an adequate understanding of the past. Humanity cannot be understood by way of its physical remnants alone. However, the Writings go further than Spengler (or Dilthey) insofar as they see the necessity of developing our “spiritual susceptibilities” which includes “*the quickening of mental capacity*” [PUP 340]. With such a spiritually-based “quickenings” of our intellects historians will be able gain new, and hitherto invisible, insights into the historical process. In other words, clinging to the “materialist methodologies” hinders the progress of acquiring historical insights both for Spengler and the Bahá'í Writings.

Third, Spengler studied history not on the basis of sequential events and cause-and-effect relationships but rather on the basis of forms, structures and functions, or, as he put it, “morphologically.”¹³⁰ He completely rejects the division of history into ancient, medieval, renaissance and modern as being Euro-centric and, thereby, distorted. Instead, he focussed on the repetitions that occurred as cultures went through the various phases in their life-cycles. His morphological studies examine the forms, structures and functions in which cultures express their ideas, feelings, art, sciences, religion and politics among others. He found there are amazing correspondences and analogs between unlike cultures in the same phases of existence.

One of the most controversial aspects of Spengler’s theory is that each culture is self-contained and can neither influence or be influenced by other cultures. To paraphrase St. Thomas Aquinas, the reason is that whatever influence is received from the outside, is always received in the terms of the receiver’s beliefs¹³¹ i.e. in ways that the receiver can understand. This is also because each culture has its own “world-feeling,”¹³²

“Destiny-Idea” and “prime symbol” are essentially incomprehensible to other cultures. Their fundamental “world-feelings,” “Destiny-ideas” and “prime symbols” are too different for that to happen. Each culture can only see other cultures from its own perspective and, therefore, never really ‘contact’ or understand the other culture in itself.¹³³ The influence that is ‘sent out’ is not the same as the influence that arrives. Intercultural influence as usually understood does not occur. Furthermore, [c]onnotations are not transferable”¹³⁴ are an enormous part of any culture’s communication. Because each culture is essentially isolated each culture also has its own character that shapes all aspects of its life, beginning with the “world-feeling” and including the sciences, arts, philosophy, mathematics, music and religion. The Bahá'í Writings, as will be shown below, reveal the serious short-coming of this view.

One of the unavoidable consequences of that cultures are self-enclosed monads is a strong epistemological and ethical relativism. ‘Truth’ is truth for one culture — there are no universal truths just as there is no universal good. As we shall see later, Spengler undermines his own position in this regard by positing a number of universal attributes of humans and cultures.

11: Comparing the Bahá'í Writings with Spengler

One of the first questions we might ask vis-a-vis the Bahá'í Writings and Spengler is if there are any correlations with Spengler’s “Destiny-idea,” “world-feeling,” and “prime symbol. In our view, the strongest such correlation concerns the “Destiny-idea.” The Bahá'í Writings exemplify the concept of “Destiny-Idea” insofar as the Manifestations have a general and a unique mission that that informs all cultures They inaugurate. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that

The mission of the Prophets, the revelation of the Holy Books, the manifestation of the heavenly Teachers and

the purpose of divine philosophy all center in the training of the human realities so that they may become clear and pure as mirrors and reflect the light and love of the Sun of Reality. [PUP 60, emphasis added]

This is the general mission of all Manifestations. However, each Manifestation also has a unique mission within the historical process. In addition to their station of “essential unity” [GWB 52] the Manifestations have another station.

The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. [GWB 52, emphasis added]

From this perspective, each culture inaugurated by the Manifestation has a general purpose or mission and a particular task in achieving the general mission. In this way a “Destiny-idea” is imparted to the cultures receiving guidance from the Manifestations.

In our understanding, the Writings also exemplify what Spengler calls “world-feeling,” i.e. our attitude and feelings about the world around us. For example, it is possible to have a “world-feeling” of mistrust as in Sartrean existentialism, a power struggle as in Marxism or Fascism, or disenchantment as in much modern literature and philosophy. The fact that all things but especially humanity exemplify the names of God is, indeed, a “re-enchantment of the world”¹³⁵ as a sacred place, and all beings as fundamentally sacred. Every being is a moment of divine revelation in its own way.

How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested

with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. [GWB 176]

In our view, Bahá'u'lláh's statement expresses the Bahá'í "world-feeling" of the sacred nature of reality and the high station of humankind and its spiritual vocation and destiny. This "world-feeling" pervades the Writings and should pervade Bahá'í life. Indeed, this statement is a potent encapsulation of many Bahá'í teachings as well as the Bahá'í "world-feeling."

In the Bahá'í Writings, the "prime symbol" as Spengler uses it, is 'light' which implicitly includes space since light has to be 'somewhere,' i.e. perceived in some perceptual or conceptual space. (Spengler's "prime symbol" involves varying intuition of space.) The pervasive sun, light and dark imagery used throughout the Writings; the emanationist metaphysics associated with the image of the sun¹³⁶; and the importance of 'planes' suggest — to this author at least — that light is the underlying symbol of the Writings.

Another concept important to Spengler is 'pseudomorphosis' which happens when

an older alien culture lies so massively over the land that a young Culture, born in the land cannot get its breath and fails not only to achieve pure and specific expression forms, but even to develop its own self-consciousness.¹³⁷

This concept has some obvious similarities to post-colonial situations in which an alien culture smothers or almost smothers a newer culture struggling for existence. Although the concept of pseudomorphosis has no counterparts in the Writings, it is relevant in another, pragmatic way. It serves to alert us to the temptation or danger of allowing "an attempt [to

be] made to impose, on the Bahá'í community's own study of the Revelation, exclusively materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to its [the Faith's] very nature.”¹³⁸ A pseudomorphosis is precisely what might happen if such an imposition of “a purely materialistic interpretation of reality [were] imposed on scholarly activity of every kind, at least in the Western world.”¹³⁹ Those who support such a “materialistic framework ... have even gone so far as to stigmatize whoever proposes a variation of these [materialistic] methods as wishing to obscure the truth rather than unveil it.”¹⁴⁰ To forestall a pseudomorphosis – at least in the culture of scholarship – it is necessary to avoid undue reliance and trust on “materialistic methodologies.”

Perhaps the most important similarity between the Bahá'í grand narrative and Spengler are the concepts of societies, the world, cultures and civilizations as being organic in nature. In other words, they embody highly complex inter-active relationships that transcend the mere sum of their constituent parts. The underlying belief that the Writings and Spengler share is that society is more than a collection of atomic, i.e. separate and distinct individuals who are not intrinsically connected in any way. Rather, society has an emergent character, i.e. a nature or essence that cannot be reduced to its constituent parts. A classic illustration of emergent characteristics is water which has qualities and behaviors that cannot be reduced to or predicted from oxygen and hydrogen by themselves. When two hydrogen and one oxygen atom are joined, a whole new level or plane of reality becomes manifest with new, hitherto unknowable attributes such a liquidity and expansion when frozen. The organic view of society makes the same point about groups of individuals. Bahá'u'lláh points to this organic nature of society when He says, “*Regard the world as the human body*” [GWB 254]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of “*the great body of human society*” [PUP 233, SDC 33, PDC 122].

The seasonal analogy supports the organic view of society insofar as we are expected to take it seriously as a model for a

natural process it directs our analysis and judgment into that direction. Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá relates the physical and spiritual seasons in *Some Answered Questions* in a series of passages too long to quote here [SAQ ch.14]. In this section, he explains the correspondences between the physical and spiritual seasons. After explaining the physical and spiritual spring, summer and autumn, he says,

Winter arrives – that is, the chill of ignorance and unawareness envelops the world, and the darkness of wayward and selfish desires prevails. Apathy and defiance ensue, with indolence and folly, baseness and animal qualities, coldness and stone-like torpor, even as in the wintertime when the terrestrial globe is deprived of the influence of the rays of the sun and becomes waste and desolate. Once the realm of minds and thoughts reaches this stage, there remains naught but perpetual death and unending non-existence. [SAQ ch.14]

It must be noted that “nonexistence” in the Writings is relative, i.e. it means ‘existent’ or ‘nonexistent’ relative to something that is higher or lower in the scale of being. For example, the human world is nonexistent from the perspective of the mineral world because the mineral world cannot perceive and comprehend mankind’s existence [SAQ ch67]. The spiritual world of the “rational soul” does not exist for the animal soul. In other words, by living more according to their “animal instincts” and not according to the “rational soul,” people slip into ‘nonexistence’ in regard to their specifically human capacities.

Spengler agrees that societies and cultures are organic in nature. H. Stuart Hughes writes,

Spengler called his method ‘morphological.’ That is, it represented an application to history of the biologists’ concept of living forms. Each culture, in his view, was an organism, which like any other living thing went

through a regular and predictable course of birth, growth, maturity and decay. Or in more imaginative language, it experienced its spring, summer, autumn, and winter. This biological metaphor provided the conceptual frame giving unity and coherence to the rest.¹⁴¹

As already noted, the Writings accept the organic “conceptual frame” for thinking about culture.

In addition to the seasonal metaphor, the Writings also use the metaphor of human growth from birth to old age as an explanatory principle in understanding the life-cycles of societies and cultures. For example, Shoghi Effendi writes

The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.
[WOB 202]

Obviously, the seasonal and the human growth metaphor deliver the same message: societies and cultures are living things and go through the appropriate phases of development and, eventually, die. Such a life course applies to all living things, i.e. is predictable. The Writings and Spengler agree on this issue.

Predictability is one of the most controversial issues in regards to historical metanarratives. Can historians predict future events and/or developments? Of course, Bahá'u'lláh can

do so — and does so in His letters to the monarchs of Europe — but He is a Manifestation with privileged access to timeless knowledge. Ordinary historians lack such divine insight. However, they can — if they wish — make use of three sources of information to make well informed guesses about the general course of coming events. The first is the recognition of repeating patterns in the past, for example, all cultures undergo birth and death; power struggles occur within them; the deaths are often violent. There is a long history of historians finding various patterns even in our time as seen in the rise of “Big History” and Global History¹⁴² as an academic discipline and such publications as *The Human Web* by two distinguished historians.¹⁴³ These studies provide positive reasons for believing such patterns are real.

The belief that there are patterns in the historical process is supported by the universality of human nature. The Bahá'í Writings recognize the oneness of human nature explicitly, while Spengler's vision of detailed correspondences in the phases of eight unconnected “High Cultures” implicitly presupposes the universality of human nature. The Bahá'í Writings go even further — they predict specifics such as the decline and degeneration of religion and civil society, the arrival of a new Manifestation and the persecution and ‘war’ against the new faith. The exact outward attributes of these events depends on time, place and situation but the essential events re-occur. That is because human beings are specific kinds of entities and, therefore, have a wide but limited range of responses to situations. There are, for example, only so many ways to deal with a severe drought: we can stay and try to survive; we can migrate to better weather; we can make deals for food e.g. labor; we can wait for others to donate food; or we can plunder food from other groups either by raids or outright conquest. Since human nature is universal, i.e. human responses to various situations fall within certain parameters — as we see in clinical and social psychology — we would logically expect repeating

patterns and a resulting ability to predict the future, at least in outline.

The third support for belief in historical patterns comes from the organic nature of society. Like all other organisms and organizations, societies have needs that must be met for survival. For example, as the Writings indicate, unity or social cohesion based on a common goal and/or world-view; they also need structure and a willingness to work within it [MBW 103]. It is possible to predict that if these needs are not met, society will disintegrate.

The organic metaphors have a number of far-reaching consequences in regards to our understanding of cultures and history. One of the most important is how they shape the relationship between the individual in society, especially in regards to freedom. To exist, organisms require a balance between the nature and the interests of the individual and the nature and interests of the whole, i.e. society. Cancer, for example, is precisely the result of this balance being lost and individual cells going out of control, act only for their own interests and, thereby, destroy the organism itself. In short, it is an excess of individual ‘liberty’ by one part at the expense of the whole. That, i.e. the necessity of “*reciprocity*” [PUP 338], in organic systems is why the Bahá’í Writings do not present individual liberty as an isolated end-in-itself that over-rides all other values under all circumstances. It is an important value but not the only one and, therefore, must be balanced with others. For that reason, Bahá’u’lláh states, “*We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others*” [GWB 335]. He adds,

Consider for instance such things as liberty, civilization and the like. However much men of understanding may favorably regard them, they will, if carried to excess, exercise a pernicious influence upon men. [GWB 216]

Indeed, He goes on to warn us that *"If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation"* [GWB 342].

He also states,

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing. Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance ... Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness ... We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others. We, verily, are the All-Knowing. [GWB 335, emphasis added]

In our understanding of this declaration, the rights of the individual should not extend to the point of damaging the society on which s/he depends, or to demean "the dignity of his station" as a human being. Spengler has similar ideas about freedom of which he says, "now what is understood by freedom is in fact indiscipline,"¹⁴⁴ which rejects the "submission" we need to act in accordance with our "dignity." Elsewhere, Spengler says, that people want "freedom *from* something;"¹⁴⁵ i.e. something that "is always, purely negative. It consists in the repudiation of tradition, dynasty, Caliphate."¹⁴⁶ These words imply, that freedom — as stated by Bahá'u'lláh — needs to be 'disciplined,' i.e. kept within proper bounds in order not to become a destructive part of the social organism.

As noted above, cultures and dispensations inevitably decay and die and will be replaced. Bahá'u'lláh and Spengler agree that not only modern Western civilization but also the world as a whole is in its final stages of its winter phase and requires

renewal. At first sight, and certainly judged by the title, Spengler's views are confined to the western civilization. Appearances to the contrary, it must be observed that the term 'West' is no longer as geographically confined as it once was. This can be observed in the domination of western science and technology as well as their products and impacts on thought, feelings, attitudes, expectations and tastes in arts and entertainment. Spengler's concerns about the effects of science and technology can also be applied globally to virtually all other cultures and civilizations. In other words, many of the symptoms of decline can be discovered in all modern societies which to a large extent are all westernized and thus susceptible to Spengler's analysis. Consequently, there are good reasons to see Spengler's study as having global relevance and working in support of Bahá'u'lláh's descriptions of the global winter phase.

However, it is important to recall that the disintegration of an old world order does not mean 'total destruction' of everything it has achieved and contributes to the advancement of mankind. There is genuine good in current civilization of the West as well as the world that is worth preserving. We cannot contribute to "an ever-advancing civilization" [GWB 214] if we constantly reject and abandon the achievements of the past and cannot use them to make progress in the future. In short, we must accept the good of the past and re-think it in light of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

Spengler tries to comfort us by saying that there is nothing we can do about our current situation¹⁴⁷ and that like ancient Rome, the time for greatness in art, philosophy and great literature is past, and that engineers, physical scientists, financiers and inventors are the genuinely pre-eminent 'philosophers' of our time.¹⁴⁸ He sums up his view by saying "We have descended from the perspective of the bird to that of a frog."¹⁴⁹ I suspect 'Abdu'l-Bahá would approve of this metaphor which suggests we have fallen from a spiritual or

transcendental view of the world to a lower, strictly materialist view of reality.

Living in the winter or old age of a culture is extraordinarily difficult even if we know that a new and even greater will arise from the ruins of the old. Shoghi Effendi refers to the

steadily deepening crisis which mankind is traversing, on the morrow of the severest ordeal it has yet suffered, and the attendant tribulations and commotions which a travailing age must necessarily experience, as a prelude to the birth of the new World Order, destined to rise upon the ruins of a tottering civilization. [CF 39]

Bahá'u'lláh predicts the world's "*perversity will long continue* [GWB 118, emphasis added]. Statements like these are not negativistic but, on the contrary, are intended encourage an 'evolutionary attitude.' Such an attitude ensures we do not become obsessively attached to any particular cultural or dispensational form and defend it as the necessary and final form a society or a religion can take. These dire predictions may also be seen as an intellectual anti-dote against clinging to the past. We might also see it as an on-going reminder to remain humble. In summary, this life-cycle model of history emphasizes that cultures and dispensations are both unique and limited in the potentials they have to actualize and that cultural death is normal. Shoghi Effendi makes a similar point about the fall — and rise — of cultures saying,

Such simultaneous processes of rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other, are but aspects of a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá'u'lláh, the theater of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind. [ADJ 72]

However, the Bahá'í Writings differ from Spengler insofar as they note that the exhaustion and fall of one civilization is closely connected to the rise of a new one through the influence of a new Manifestation. The new culture originates with the inspirational power of a new Manifestation until it, too, is exhausted and disintegrates.¹⁵⁰ This sequence of events constitutes the basis of progressive revelation which is another Bahá'í concept incompatible with Spengler's grand narrative. In his view, there is no progress in any human activities; instead, there is only an accumulation of absolutely irreconcilable creations rooted in different "world-feelings," "Destiny-ideas," and "prime symbols." Consequently, Spengler advocates epistemological and ethical relativism because he does not believe there is any objective, 'Archimedean point' from which to judge as to truth and morality. On this score, too, he is in conflict with the Bahá'í Writings which see the Manifestation i.e. Bahá'u'lláh, as being such an 'Archimedean point.' Moreover, Spengler's relativism also requires him to reject progressive revelation since the idea of progress entails making epistemological and moral judgments about the value, moral legitimacy and truthfulness of cultural practices and achievements. However, Spengler's relativism must not be conflated and confused with Shoghi Effendi's statement that for Bahá'ís, "*religious truth is not absolute but relative*" [WOB 115]. In our understanding, Shoghi Effendi refers to the manner in which "religious truth" is expressed is "relative," i.e. adapted for specific times, places and circumstances without suggesting that the essential religious truths, the "eternal verities" [PDC 108], are dependent on us or our situations.¹⁵¹

Indeed, unlike the Writings, Spengler sees no connection between the rise and falls of the "high Cultures" and in that sense, history is random and irrational. In his view, no real contact between cultures and civilizations is possible. The Bahá'í Writings, on the other hand, see the fall of one civilization as the necessary prelude to the ascent of the next. Precisely because the destruction of the old is necessary for the

construction of the new. Speaking of contemporary Christianity, Shoghi Effendi states, it

weakened, and was contributing, in an increasing measure, its share to the process of general disintegration — a process that must necessarily precede the fundamental reconstruction of human society. [WOB 186]

In regards to these twin disintegrative and integrative processes, Shoghi Effendi notes,

How striking, how edifying the contrast between the process of slow and steady consolidation that characterizes the growth of its infant strength and the devastating onrush of the forces of disintegration that are assailing the outworn institutions, both religious and secular, of present-day society! [WOB 154]

In other words, in the Bahá'í grand narrative correlates a process of disintegration with a process of construction and integration, both of which work simultaneously because both have the same immediate cause, viz. a new dispensation inaugurated by a new Manifestation of God. The disintegrative phase is also necessary because without it, the new dispensation and culture would have no space to grow and expand.

Knowledge of the twin processes also gives Bahá'í a confidence in life in the contemporary historical processes and, thereby, protection against depression, despair and the temptations of nihilism in regards to the future. Unfortunately, in Spengler's theory of cultures as isolated monads and no connection between the fall and rise of cultures, such pessimism, despair and nihilism come all too easily. We should also note at this point that Spengler's concept of a "Second Religiousness" does not correspond to the arrival of a new Manifestation and surge of new spiritual energy; rather, it refers to a fresh but uncreative burst of enthusiasm for old

religious forms and in that sense is a reactionary not revolutionary development.

Despite the foregoing differences, the Writings and Spengler agree that cultures and civilizations are based in religion and succumb with the fall of religion:

Every soul has religion, which is only another word for its existence. All living forms in which it expresses itself — all arts, doctrines, customs, all metaphysical and mathematical form-worlds, all ornament, every column and verse and idea — are ultimately religious, and must be so ... As the essence of every Culture is religion, so — and consequently — the essence of every Civilization is irreligion — the two words are synonymous ... It is this *extinction of living inner religiousness*, which gradually tells upon even the most insignificant element in a man's being, that becomes phenomenal in the historical world-picture at the turn from the Culture to the Civilization the Climacteric of the Culture ... the time of change in which a mankind loses its spiritual fruitfulness for ever, and building takes the place of begetting ... the change manifests itself not only in the extinction of great art, of great courtesy, of great formal thought, of the great style in all things, but also quite carnally in the childlessness and “race-suicide” of the civilized and rootless strata, a phenomenon not peculiar to ourselves but already observed and deplored — and of course not remedied — in Imperial Rome and Imperial China.¹⁵²

The Bahá'í Writings see “Divine Revelation” and the cultures that arise from it, as “orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final” [WOB 115]. In other words, the Manifestations do not appear in accidental order but appear according to the evolutionary needs of humankind. As we have already mentioned above, the Bahá'í view is that history is rational, not fortuitous, and teleological and not aimless. By

contrast, no inherent order exists between the rise and fall of Spengler's "High Cultures."

The various issue considered above lead to an important question, *viz.* 'Is it useful to us to know about historical patterns and the possibility of predicting them?' First, it seems obvious that we can expect different attitudes and actions between a world-view that sees history as having some explainable order and one that sees history as a haphazard sequence of events. Bahá'í who sees the twin processes of disintegration and construction at work now and in the past, will actually be able to view the current world situation with an attitude of hope, a sense of meaning, a clear sense of values, a clear commitment to purposive action and a sense of compassion for those who flounder in confusion in the changes of our time. Such knowledge provides understanding of our spiritual, social and political environment and with such understanding comes a certain sense of control; confidence; an enhanced capacity to analyze, assess and judge. In other words, it enhances our capacity for rational thought and – sometimes –for rational action. These psycho-spiritual assets may seem trivial when limited to an individual but can have enormous socio-political impact if wide-spread throughout society. It might conceivably affect leadership decisions – although we find this unlikely given the need for popularity to win elections. However, the understanding facilitated by a knowledge of future historical phases, allows us to evaluate current developments and policies vis-à-vis the inevitable changes that must come.

Historical patterns enable us to make predictions about the future but we must still determine if these predictions are general and/or specific. Knowing in which season we are e.g. winter allows us to predict some of the phenomena mentioned in the Writings, as the attributes of the winter season:

*When that Sun reaches its zenith it begins to decline,
and that summer season of the spirit is followed by*

autumn. Growth and development are arrested; soft breezes turn into blighting winds; and the season of dearth and want dissipates the vitality and beauty of the gardens, the fields, and the bowers. That is, spiritual attractions vanish, divine qualities decay, the radiance of the hearts is dimmed, the spirituality of the souls is dulled, virtues become vices, and sanctity and purity are no more. Of the law of God naught remains but a name, and of the divine teachings naught but an outward form. The foundations of the religion of God are destroyed and annihilated, mere customs and traditions take their place, divisions appear, and steadfastness is changed into perplexity. Spirits die away, hearts wither, and souls languish. [SAQ ch.14]

Shoghi Effendi is even more explicit about the general trends:

The signs of moral downfall, consequent to the dethronement of religion and the enthronement of these usurping idols, are too numerous and too patent for even a superficial observer of the state of present-day society to fail to notice. The spread of lawlessness, of drunkenness, of gambling, and of crime; the inordinate love of pleasure, of riches, and other earthly vanities; the laxity in morals, revealing itself in the irresponsible attitude towards marriage, in the weakening of parental control, in the rising tide of divorce, in the deterioration in the standard of literature and of the press, and in the advocacy of theories that are the very negation of purity, of morality and chastity – these evidences of moral decadence, invading both the East and the West, permeating every stratum of society, and instilling their poison in its members of both sexes, young and old alike, blacken still further the scroll upon which are inscribed the manifold transgressions of an unrepentant humanity. [PDC 114]

However, while general trends and patterns may be predictable, nothing either in the Writings or Spengler allows us to make specific predictions about future events. Of course, this applies to us and not to Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'u'lláh, for example, foretold specific events like the catastrophes awaiting France and Germany and the downfall of Sultan Abdu'l-Aziz.

12: Toynbee and the Bahá'í Grand Narrative

Arnold Toynbee is one of the most controversial historians of the 20th Century, the main reason for this being his twelve volume *magnum opus A Study of History*, published between 1934 and 1961. In the years before he died, Toynbee, with the aid of Third Reich historian Jane Caplan, released a huge one volume abridgement of his twelve volume magnum opus in which he gave his final responses to criticisms and made final adjustments to his ideas. This is the text to which we shall generally refer because it represents Toynbee's thought in its final form. When necessary, we shall consult his original twelve volume work. An incredibly prolific author, Toynbee also wrote more than a dozen works about history and historiography. It is worth noting that decades before Edward Said and post-colonial studies, Toynbee was sharply critical of the West's representation of Islamic history and cultures.

The reception of Toynbee's *A Study of History* was and remains sharply divided. He is the only historian to have been on the cover of *Time* magazine (March 17, 1947) which indicates just how famous he had become – and still is – among the general public. During the 1990's, his advocacy of a civilizational rather than national approach to history has gained “renewed currency”¹⁵³ with the rise in academia of Big History, Global History, World Systems Theory and the World History Association. Sebastian Conrad's book, *What is Global History?* suggests that in light of social, economic and cultural globalization, civilizational not national studies of history not

only will but *must* come to the fore. Particularly noteworthy on this issue are the words of J R McNeil and William H McNeil, who write in *The Human Web* that history shows clear patterns of increasing development and expansion in communication, trade, ideas, and competition throughout history. They write, “So the general direction of history has been toward greater and greater social cooperation — both voluntary and compelled — driven by the realities of social competition.”¹⁵⁴ This statement strikes a Bahá’í ‘note’ for three reasons. First, it asserts that history has a “direction” or goal; second, it harmonizes with Shoghi Effendi’s statements about the expansion of the social units, i.e. the expansion of co-operation; third, this development will occur with or without the consent or wishes of the historical actors. As the Báb says, “*All are His servants and all abide by His bidding!*” [SWB 216] From a Bahá’í standpoint, the only major omission here is failure to refer to the Manifestations. These new developments in historiography suggest that Toynbee — and Spengler and Sorokin — had simply been too far ahead of his time for a majority of academics.

Among academic historians, however, the response to his work rangers from open hostility and even mockery to respectful and carefully reasoned disagreement. According to H. Trevor-Roper, Toynbee was “the Messiah” of his own concocted “religion of Mish-Mash ... his mind is ... fundamentally anti-rational and illiberal.”¹⁵⁵ Trevor-Roper misreads Toynbee as saying that we should “all creep back under the skirts of a received medieval church.”¹⁵⁶ In contrast to Trevor-Roper’s spleen, we have the respectful but rigorous critique of W.H. Walsh, an important philosopher of history who asks if “any amount of *historical* knowledge can serve as an adequate ground of such deductions about the *meaning* of history as are drawn here?”¹⁵⁷ The problem with this question concerns what is included “historical knowledge.” Toynbee, like Spengler, answer this important question by showing the limits of strictly empirical knowledge and the need for empathy, intuition, and judgment in understanding history and acquiring “historical

knowledge.” Pieter Geyl is similarly meticulous but respectful in his criticism of “apriorism”¹⁵⁸ i.e. Toynbee’s imposition of his ideas upon the historical materials. There is one major problem with this critique. First, it is easy to make but virtually impossible to prove. The extreme wealth of historical data in Toynbee’s twelve volume opus does not support the belief that Toynbee’s schema did not develop from or engagement with his empirical studies. It is not credible to assert that such breadth and depth of engagement did not play a major role in the formation of his schema. In fact, we know empirical evidence played a key role in shaping his ideas because they led Toynbee to revise his conclusions in Volume 12 and in his personal one volume abridgement. Second, the *apriorism* critique can be made of almost any historical study, because bare facts seldom simply ‘speak for themselves’ – they must be evaluated and understood and doing so requires bringing other, external concepts to bear. The Holocaust (*Shoa*) provides a classic example. There is no physical document of any kind linking Hitler personally to the Wannsee Conference (January, 1942) when the decision to annihilate European Jewry was made. The diaries of Goebbels, Hitler’s closest confidant, and *Hitler’s Table Talk* mention nothing about this. What does this fact tell us by itself? Contrary to what Holocaust deniers say, this fact tells us very little. To understand this fact, we must bring in not only facts but, among other things, our empathy, intuition and “*Einfuehlung*” – all non-empirical factors – to make sense of this.

Let us now turn to Toynbee’s grand narrative in outline. One of the most obvious similarities concerns the structure of the historical process. As we understand them, the Bahá'í Writings combine a two-fold pattern in the unfolding of civilizations: the “circle of life” as *The Lion King* calls it, with a cycle of seasons, birth and death, and the linear progress as seen in “progressive revelation.” We have previously described this as an expanding stretch out spiral, or, in Toynbee’s terms as a chariot’s wheels and axle. In Toynbee’s words, the wheel and

axle of a chariot is such that “under the repetitive movement of the wheel ... the vehicle ... attains its unique realization ... and its unique goal.”¹⁵⁹ This common structure of the historical process is significant for three reasons. First, it means that history is not a random process, a mere sequence of events without any long-term structure, direction or goal. Appearances to the contrary, history is teleological and has order. This is significant because of the tremendous effect the realization of such order has on the world-views of both individuals and collectives. In turn, this affects life choices, values, motivation, conduct and virtually all other aspects of the human psyche. For proof we need look no further than the tremendous motivating effect Marx’s equally teleological theory of history had on his followers and their willingness to suffer and sacrifice.

Second, these models of history mean that history — at least in its broad strokes — is predictable, especially if we are aware of our position — such as winter or a period of moral disintegration — in the process. We can, as a minimum, know what sort of developments to expect. Finally, because we can, at least broadly, predict future developments, we are also better equipped to serve the needs of our time. As Bahá’u’lláh says, “*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements*” [GWB 213].

The heart of Toynbee’s theory is the concept of “challenge-and-response,”¹⁶⁰ i.e. the belief that all cultures and civilizations face challenges to which they must respond successfully if they are to continue their growth and development. The image he uses is that of mountain climbers scaling a cliff: some succeed and reach the next challenge; some remain stuck, or “arrested” at a certain point; and some barely get started and are “abortive,” i.e. stop. Failure means either repeatedly facing the same challenge until they are conquered or succumbing to them or giving up and ‘aborting’ their climb. However, no response is pre-determined — challenge-and-response is not the same as

cause-and-effect¹⁶¹ — and neither tools nor race¹⁶² nor other physical advantage guarantee success. As with the Bahá'í Writings, personal and collective free will are essential features of Toynbee's grand narrative. What matters ultimately in the success or failure of a civilization is "the vision, initiative, persistence and above all, self-command ... [and] the spirit in which Man responds"¹⁶³ to the challenges s/he faces.¹⁶⁴

Toynbee applies the challenge-and-response criteria to 28 civilizations. Nineteen of these are major: Egyptian, Andean (Incan), Sinic or Shang, Minoan, Sumerian, Mayan, Indian, Hittite, Western or European, Russian Orthodox Christian, Far Eastern (China, Korea, Japan from 500 CE to 1912 CE), Persian, Arabic, Hindu, Mexican or Aztec, Yucatec and Babylonian. Some of these civilizations are related or "affiliated" to earlier predecessors in the same region as for example, 'the original Sinic civilization around the Yellow River and the later Far Eastern civilization. The Yucatec and the later Aztec civilization are another example. Among the aborted civilizations, he includes the Irish¹⁶⁵ and Scandinavian,¹⁶⁶ and among the "arrested" civilizations i.e. those which attained a certain point and never moved on to the next challenge, he includes the Inuit or Eskimo and the Ottoman.¹⁶⁷ There is, of course, controversy about some of what he designates as separate 'civilizations' — e.g. the Sinic and the Far Eastern — but the list is sufficiently long and varied to preclude criticisms of having too narrow a base and being tainted by racism.

Another major similarity is the most essential criteria of growth in a civilization is inward, spiritual growth not material progress. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that

no matter how far the world of humanity may advance in material civilization, it is nevertheless in need of spiritual virtues and the bounties of God. The spirit of man is not illumined and quickened through material sources. [FWU 58]

Elsewhere he reminds us that

hearts must receive the Bounty of the Holy Spirit, so that Spiritual civilization may be established. For material civilization is not adequate for the needs of mankind and cannot be the cause of its happiness. Material civilization is like the body and spiritual civilization is like the soul. Body without soul cannot live. [ABL 29]

This statement clearly establishes the primacy of the spiritual over the material in the development of civilization. Without inward spiritual development, true civilization cannot arise or thrive. It is possible to be “materially advanced but spiritually backward” [MUHJ68]. Toynbee has similar views regarding what he calls the “movement of transference”¹⁶⁸:

True growth consists in a progressive change of emphasis and transfer of energy and shifting of the scene of action out of the field of the macrocosm and into that of the microcosm; and in this new arena victorious responses to challenges do not take the form of overcoming an external obstacles but manifest themselves instead in a progressive self-articulation.¹⁶⁹

Toynbee’s term for this “transfer of energy” from the outer phenomenal world to his inner psycho-spiritual nature is “etherialization ... in which challenges do not impinge from the outside but arise from within.”¹⁷⁰ This, too, corresponds with the primacy of inward growth over external, material development in the Bahá’í Writings. “Etherialization” is a sign of growth because

Growth means that the growing personality or civilization tends to become its own environment and its own challenge and its own field of action. In other words, the criterion of growth is progress towards self-determination.¹⁷¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá shows a similar connection between inward freedom – becoming one’s own challenge and thinking for one’s self – and growth:

When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail – that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs – development and growth are inevitable.

[PUP 197]

The material factors present the human and natural environmental challenges but the human spirit – in both its secular and religious sense – decides whether or not to confront the challenges and how and with what persistence. This spirit cannot be reduced to material explanations and consequently, purely materialist explanations are inadequate to explain why civilizations arise or fail. Here, too, Toynbee’s thought converges with the Bahá’í Writings insofar as both are premised on religion as essential for an adequate understanding humankind. Moreover, Toynbee’s “trans-rationalist”¹⁷² views – reason can tell us some things but not everything – agrees with the “moderate rationalist”¹⁷³ views found in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Both the Writings and Toynbee agree that the understanding and wisdom about human experience gathered by the “Higher Religions”¹⁷⁴ has relevance to our interpretation and understanding of history which is, after all, the record of human actions. In other words, both the Writings and Toynbee recognize that non-material factors, i.e. spirit are definitive in civilizational success or failure. As Toynbee says, “the spiritual progress of individual souls in this life will in fact bring with it much more social progress than could be attained in any other way.”¹⁷⁵

The issue of spirit inevitably raises the question of God or the divine in Toynbee’s theory of history. Toynbee certainly recognizes the transcendent and imminent as ontologically real forces in history. He borrows his term for this ground-of-being

from Henri Bergson, i.e. the “*elan vital*.” Toynbee writes that he has

attained the conception of one omnipresent power which manifests itself in the performance and achievements of all Mankind and all Life. We may conceive of this power as a *transcendent first cause* and call it God, or as an *imminent source of continuous creation* and call it (as Bergson calls it) *Evolution Creatrice* or *Elan Vital*.¹⁷⁶

Like the Bahá’í Writings, Toynbee recognizes that a non-material power is manifesting itself through the phenomenal world and that ‘what we see is not all that we get.’ This *elan vital*, which is referred to throughout *A Study in History* serves as the ground-of-being of all things. Like the Bahá’í concept of God, Toynbee’s *elan vital* is both a “transcendent final cause” and an omnipresent “*immanent source of continuous creation*.” It is important to note that the *elan vital* is the immanent *source* of creation and is not creation itself as it is in pantheism. As in the Writings, creation is an on-going process. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us that the “*creation thereof [the universe] is without beginning and without end*” [PUP 378] and Bahá’u’lláh says, “*Endeavour now to apprehend from these two traditions the mysteries of ‘end,’ ‘return,’ and ‘creation without beginning or end’*” [KI 168]. In other words, the concept of God in the Writings and in Toynbee is ontologically similar but not necessarily the same inasmuch as Toynbee’s concept does not include an exact counterpart of the concept of divine Manifestations as messengers of God. However, he has an analogous concept, i.e. the creative individuals who provide the creative impulse at the start of a civilization. They

are *superhuman* in a very literal for they have attained self-mastery which manifests itself in a rare power of self-determination ... they are *privileged* human beings whose desire it is ... to set the imprint of the *elan* upon

the whole of mankind ... The creative personality feels the impulse of internal necessity to *transfigure* his fellow men by converting them to his own insight.¹⁷⁷

Elsewhere he states that it is “creative personalities ... [who are] in the vanguard of civilization.”¹⁷⁸ From statements such as these, we can observe that Toynbee’s thought was moving in the direction of recognizing Manifestations as originators of civilization. Like the Writings, Toynbee recognizes that strictly materialist explanations of the birth of civilizations are inadequate. While such explanations can describe the conditions under which a civilization started to grow, they cannot explain why in similar or even the same conditions, the civilizational process begins in one place but not in another. In fact, the creative *elan* or drive of a civilization requires what Toynbee calls a “creative minority” which devises solutions to the challenges and unifies a shapeless social mass to give it direction and a new spirit. A good example of such a creative minority would be Charles Martel and his grandson Charlemagne – although the ultimate source of their power comes from Christ Who is the fountainhead of Western Civilization. When civilization starts to breakdown, the “creative minority” is replaced by a “dominant minority” which cannot rule by attraction and loyalty but rule through violent oppression, marginalizing or even ‘crusades’ as did Catholicism during the Albigenian campaigns (1209–1229 CE).

The importance of spiritual and religious aspects of civilizations is also evident in the later development of civilizations. Toynbee refers to these as “higher religions that liberate human beings from their servitude to their ancient civilizations.”¹⁷⁹ In other words, they are explicitly, i.e. consciously addressed to all of humanity and not to a portion of it. (This, of course, creates a confusion with Judaism which has elements of both insofar as some groups stress universal appeal and others stress the matrilineal blood-line to determine ‘Jewish identity.’) Interestingly enough, Toynbee’s definition

bears some resemblance to the Bahá'í teaching of overcoming ancestral imitations in the process of progressive revelation. To break out of an ancestral religious mindset and culture obviously requires that we abandon at least some inherited attitudes, beliefs, laws, formulations and practices by recognizing them as growth-inhibiting or even harmful.

The challenges faced by civilizations are not necessarily external military threats but could also involve the natural environment as in droughts, floods, human or animal disease or internal problems with governance, economics, technology, culture or spiritual issues. For this reason, according to Toynbee, when civilizations fall, the external military attacks usually finish off a culture that is already fatally weakened from within. The fall of a corrupt Rome to the Germanic barbarians in 410 CE, 450 CE and finally in 476 CE is an obvious example of fatal inward weaknesses inviting conquest by vigorous external enemies. Here, too, is a strong convergence with the Bahá'í Writings inasmuch as both agree that the inner life of a civilization i.e. its spiritual and moral life, its “spirit” plays a decisive role in deciding whether a civilization collapses or survives to face a new challenge. Material means are secondary. To remind us of this truth, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

I want to make you understand that material progress and spiritual progress are two very different things, and that only if material progress goes hand in hand with spirituality can any real progress come about. [PT 108]

This strong emphasis on the inward mental, spiritual and moral condition of a civilization as the crucial element in its rise or fall is another reason why strictly materialist understandings of history are inevitably inadequate. The information they provide is necessary but is not sufficient. Empathy, intuition and “*Einfuehlung*” are also necessary.

In Toynbee’s grand narrative, all civilizations go through a “time of troubles” i.e. a period of conflict between members of

a civilization. This time of troubles ends with the establishment of a “universal state” which is the guarantor of order and relative peace within a particular civilization. WWI and WWII may be seen as a “time of troubles” for the nations of Europe and the European Union with its headquarters in Brussels as an attempt to establish a “universal state” to keep order. The current existential difficulties of the E.U. are perhaps the first signs of the inevitable breakdown after a “universal state” has been established. The United Nations may also be understood as the embryo of a future “universal state” or global civilization. However, we must not forget that for Toynbee the “universal state” is only a stop-gap measure to prevent an inevitable decline of a particular civilization. Two consequences follow. One is the rise of an “external proletariat” whose aim is to bring down the “universal state” in one way or another. The Germanic tribes were the “external proletariat” to Rome which they wore down until the final conquest in 476 CE. The other is the “internal proletariat,” the excluded classes within the civilization, the disenfranchised and marginalized, but within the proletariat, we often find a “chrysalis”¹⁸⁰ which are the form of a new religion, or what Toynbee calls a “universal church.”¹⁸¹ “Our survey ... has shown that principle beneficiaries of universal states are universal churches ... [and that] the church is flourishing while the state is decaying.”¹⁸² In short, “universal churches lead to new civilizations. Let us, therefore, take note of the following quote from Shoghi Effendi who reminds us of the “twin processes of internal disintegration and external chaos are being accelerated every day and are inexorably moving towards a climax” [TDH 23]. This “twin process” is what Toynbee observes when he refers to the “universal church” growing amid the tumbling ruins of the “universal state.” Shoghi Effendi refers to the

steadily deepening crisis which mankind is traversing, on the morrow of the severest ordeal it has yet suffered, and the attendant tribulations and commotions which a travailing age must necessarily experience, as a prelude

to the birth of the new World Order, destined to rise upon the ruins of a tottering civilization. [CF 39]

Here, too, the Bahá'í Writings are in general agreement with Toynbee's theory.

Having examined some of the factors that make civilizations grow, let us now examine their breakdown and decline. Let us start by recalling that the Bahá'í Writings assert that "the source of his calamities ... resides within Man himself; he carries it in his heart."¹⁸³ Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that, "*Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves*" [GWB 149]. In other words, we cannot blame the decline of a civilization on God. As already noted, both the Writings and Toynbee agree that the spirit within people determines our creative or destructive reactions to events in the material world. Individuals and collectives have free will, i.e. the power of self-determination, and, therefore, are responsible for their fates. In his examination of the characteristics that encourage and/or carry forward the process of disintegration, Toynbee lists behaviors that the Bahá'í Writings describe as being "imitations" and, therefore, to be rejected. He defines imitation as an orientation *towards* the elders and a simultaneous turn *away* from "the pioneers."¹⁸⁴ As a result, a passive attitude develops and there is a loss of flexibility and freedom in dealing with new challenges. He also says that idolatry has its roots in

intellectually and purblind worship of the part instead of the whole, of the creature instead of the Creator, of Time instead of Eternity; and this abuse of the highest faculties of the human spirit ... has its fatal effect upon the object of idolization ... In practical life this moral aberration may take the comprehensive form of an idolization of the idolator's own personality or own society ... or may take the limited form of idolization of some institution or particular technique.¹⁸⁵

'Abdu'l-Bahá warns us about the dangers of imitation, saying

Imitation destroys the foundation of religion, extinguishes the spirituality of the human world, transforms heavenly illumination into darkness and deprives man of the knowledge of God. [PUP 161]

He adds, "The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation" [TB 156]. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that "Man must leave imitation and seek reality" [PUP 169]. The notion that imitation is a way of avoiding reality is one that plays an extremely important role both in the Bahá'í grand narrative as well as Toynbee. Simply imitating past beliefs and past practices destroys the prospects for human progress by making impossible the actualization of new personal and collective potentials. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Therefore, we learn that allegiance to the essential foundation of the divine religions is ever the cause of development and progress, whereas the abandonment and beclouding of that essential reality through blind imitations and adherence to dogmatic beliefs are the causes of a nation's debasement and degradation. [PUP 363]

As the foregoing quotation shows, what makes *A Study of History* especially interesting for Bahá'í is that it explores in great detail the various forms of imitation and how they destroy a civilization. The first of these is "mimesis,"¹⁸⁶ i.e. following examples in behavior, thought and attitudes. To a certain extent mimesis is necessary for social cohesion. The problems with mimesis begin with its inevitable "mechanization of human movement and life."¹⁸⁷ The essential danger is that it prevents taking original and creative, often tradition-breaking action to engage new problems and situations. It destroys the flexibility, strength, willingness as well as daring needed to succeed in a constantly changing historical process in which new challenges are the rule and not the exception. Too much

mimesis, i.e. too much of a good thing, can apply to social relationships, financial and economic structures, military thinking, religion and values and technology among other things. Too much mimesis also destroys individual freedom and all the advantages it brings.

A second form of mimesis or imitation is what Toynbee calls “the idolization of an ephemeral self.”¹⁸⁸ Civilization is self-satisfied and content to be what it is instead of seeking new and creative ways to secure inward growth and/or meet external challenges. Toynbee’s main examples are Athens and Venice both of which ‘worshipped’ themselves in their most successful form until they were destroyed. This “idolization” can also affect “ephemeral institutions.”¹⁸⁹ In other words, institutions are so convinced of their perfection that they cannot conceive of any reason to change their thinking and/or *modus operandi*. Toynbee’s prime examples are the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. As shown by His letter to Pope Pius IX, Bahá’u’lláh shows the need for Catholicism to abandon its self-adulation as it is and to make the changes necessary to serve humankind.

A third kind of imitation is the “idolization of an ephemeral technique.”¹⁹⁰ For Toynbee this applies chiefly to military techniques as seen in the story of David and Goliath. The Philistines relied on slow moving but heavily armored warriors who were successful against all enemies — except a man with a sling. We observe this story even today with the success of asymmetrical, i.e. low-tech warfare against the highly sophisticated war machinery of the First World. Of course, Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá do not specifically mention this vis-à-vis warfare, but They do deal with it in another form, i.e. the West’s continued reliance on material methods, i.e. technology to solve problems that can only be solved by spiritual means. There are no material and technological remedies for spiritual problems. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured. [PUP 108]

13: Pitirim Sorokin and the Bahá'í Grand Narrative

Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian-American sociologist and founder of the sociology department at Harvard, is regarded as one of the foremost sociologists of the 20th Century. Employing quantitative, i.e. statistical methods to support his qualitative judgments and conclusions about world history, he developed a cyclical theory of history based on the identification of three types of 'culture complexes' which alternate as the dominating force in a society. Sorokin calls these three types the sensate, the ideational and the idealistic or integral culture complex. Each of them presents a complete world-view with its own

- metaphysics or theory of reality;
- epistemology or theory of truth and knowledge;
- logic or beliefs about rationality and reasoning;
- methods of validation;
- philosophy of human nature;
- ethics, justice and law;
- theory of governance and politics;
- aesthetics or theory of beauty and art;
- theory of science;
- theory of society, its nature and requirements.

We shall explore these three forms of culture complexes in more detail below. Before beginning, we must note that Sorokin goes to great lengths to show how his three culture complexes manifest in philosophy, especially in epistemology; in science; in religion; in the fine arts; in ethics and law; and in

politics, government and economics. In a paper such as this, it is impossible for us to follow him across this broad swath of human activity. We shall, therefore, focus most of our attention on the philosophical aspects of his studies because the “defining characteristic of each type derives from its principles of ultimate truth through which it organizes reality.”¹⁹¹ In short, Sorokin’s central principle is philosophical and we shall follow his lead.

Perhaps the most unique feature of Sorokin’s philosophy of history is the voluminous use of statistics. Historian Richard L. Simpson states,

He and his assistants did a more complete and systematic job of classifying cultural items and tracing their fluctuations than anyone before or since has attempted. Staggering numbers of artistic and literary works, legal and ethical codes, and forms of social relationships are classified, and their changing proportions of Sensatism and Ideationalism are graphed. Sorokin has shown quantitatively, where others have only argued qualitatively, to what extent fluctuations in thought patterns parallel fluctuations in other departments of life. His numerical time charts should enable historians in the future to delineate the boundaries of such periods as the Middle Ages and the Hellenistic Age with a precision never before possible.¹⁹²

This statement calls for several comments. The use of quantitative and statistical methods makes a significant contribution to bringing history and the methods of science closer together. Through the statistical analysis of large numbers of events in the sciences, arts, philosophy, religion, economics and so on, Sorokin and his collaborators were able to identify large scale patterns and trends in the historical process. In other words, despite seemingly overwhelming amounts of data, Sorokin provided scientific, i.e. quantitative proof that patterns and trends exist. The existence of such

patterns and trends opens the possibility of making the same kind of statistical predictions used in the life insurance industry. Despite virtually endless amounts of data generated by millions of customers all making independent decisions, actuarial tables are able to identify patterns and groups among policy holders. They use these patterns to make predictions about mortality among various groups. Although actuarial tables cannot predict the death of any one individual, they can accurately predict when people with a defined set of health and life-style attributes tend to die. Using this information, they set personal life insurance rates. The enormous profitability of the life insurance industry is quantitative proof that this method works. Sorokin's use of statistical methodology provides quantitative, i.e. scientific proof that Popper, Geyl and Montagu are factually wrong in their rejection of historical patterns and trends.

Sorokin and his co-workers discovered that there are three basic types of culture complexes and that the "defining characteristic of each type derives from the principles of ultimate truth through which it organizes reality."¹⁹³ On this basis, we can deduce a significant portion of a culture's attributes. Sorokin writes,

the distinguishing of one variable of a culture enables us to construct logically a large network of connections with many of its other variables; to forecast what will be the nature of each of these variables if the culture is logically integrated; and, in this way, to comprehend quickly the enormous diversity of its traits, qualities, quantities, in one united and all-embracing system ... If we discover that this culture does contain the appropriate body of traits and variables, by one stroke we obtain several important cognitive results: (1) a highly intimate and certain understanding of many of the important aspects of the culture; (2) an insight into the nature and workings of most of its significant

components; (3) a knowledge of the spectrum of its dominant mentality; (4) a comprehensive grasp of the very complex network of relationships between many of its traits which otherwise would escape us ; and (5) an answer to the question as to whether or not, and to what extent and in what parts, the culture is indeed logically integrated.¹⁹⁴

In his numerous works, Sorokin demonstrates how these culture-complexes manifest in actual societies. He shows not only the alternating dominance of one culture-complex or another but also that the dominance of one culture-complex is not absolute, i.e. vestiges of the other complexes remain active. We shall discuss this “superrhythm”¹⁹⁵ of history in more detail below.

Ideational Culture

The first of Sorokin’s three culture complexes is the ideational or spiritually oriented culture. Sorokin writes,

By Idealism as philosophy, metaphysics, or mentality is meant a system of ideology which maintains that the ultimate, or true, reality is spiritual, in the sense of God, of Platonic ideas, of immaterial spirit, of soul, or of psychical reality.¹⁹⁶

In other words, the most obvious — and most important — belief for ideational culture is the existence of God, or a ground of being, or a mysterious and unknowable Tao, or a cosmic process of dependent origination as the origin and ultimate governor of the universe. Of course, this transcendent orientation may be expressed differently in different cultures but is ultimately the same everywhere: “*truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different*” [PT 128]. The Bahá’í Writings are clearly ideational in this regard. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “*That which we imagine, is not the Reality of God; He, the*

Unknowable, the Unthinkable, is far beyond the highest conception of man" [PT 25] and Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that God is "*the Inaccessible, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, the Holy of Holies*" [GWB 5]. The foundational importance of the Transcendent is significant because it means that ideational cultures view human existence *sub specie aeternitatis* i.e. *in relationship to the Transcendent and not only in relationship to the phenomenal world or human ambition, desire and convenience. Indeed, human desires and ambition take second place not only because it is the Transcendent Who determines truth, beauty, justice, goodness and all other genuine values but also because the omniscient and omnipotent Transcendent knows our nature and understands our best long-term advantages better than we do. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "It is incumbent upon everyone to observe God's holy commandments, inasmuch as they are the wellspring of life unto the world"* [TB 126], i.e. they bring true life to us. Furthermore, ideational cultures, have a long-term time perspective on existence; they think and evaluate in terms of eternity and not in terms of short-term effects.

According to the ideational world view, the ultimate truth and ultimate basis for truth is an inherently unknowable Transcendental entity, process, power or ground of being. It is absolutely independent of any other beings although these individual beings are completely dependent on this Transcendental whatever it may be. Since its existence does not depend on itself alone, creation is not 'fully' real. Some like Plato regard the world as a shadows of a transcendent ideal world; others as an illusion or a dream or as a sinful distraction from the quest for salvation for the soul. While the Bahá'í Writings do not denigrate the phenomenal world, they make it clear that it is of secondary importance insofar as it is only a stage, a transition period on the journey of our existence. It is not the final stopping point and, therefore, cannot be an ultimate value. That is the inescapable conclusion that follows

from our spiritual nature. Throughout the Writings we find reminders that we shall not find our final destiny in this world:

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye. [SWAB 177]

Because of its transcendental orientation, the ideational culture regards intuition, spiritual insight and mystical experiences as valid sources of knowledge and concomitantly places little trust in sensory or empirical knowledge and values logic only insofar as it supports intuition or revelation or the quest for salvation: “Pure logical reasoning and the testimony of the organs of sense have only a subsidiary role and only insofar as they do not contradict revealed Scripture.”¹⁹⁷ Knowledge about the empirical or sensory world is secondary (but not worthless) to knowledge about personal salvation or one’s ultimate destiny. The Bahá’í Writings also recognize the importance of intuition in the quest for knowledge. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares,

True distinction among mankind is through divine bestowals and receiving the intuitions of the Holy Spirit. If man does not become the recipient of the heavenly bestowals and spiritual bounties, he remains in the plane and kingdom of the animal. [PUP 316, emphasis added]

Elsewhere he refers to the necessity of receiving the bounties of the Holy Spirit to make reason effective [PUP 302]. This harmonizes with ideational cultures which are more open to what Sorokin calls “the supraconscious mode of cognition”¹⁹⁸ which comes from the “supraconsciousness” an aspect of the mind above the unconscious, the ego or super-ego. It is “egoless”¹⁹⁹ i.e. beyond all sense of individuality. As a sociologist, Sorokin avoids explicitly drawing any metaphysical

conclusions from the existence of the supraconsciousness (which he deduces from cultural evidence) but it is clear that he believes in the reality of a Transcendent with which all cultures try to harmonize. The supraconsciousness which puts us into touch with the Transcendent is the source of human inspiration not only in religion but also in the arts, sciences and social relations.

From the ideational perspective, humankind is essentially spiritual in nature and, therefore, a spiritual destiny beyond the material world. Our destiny is not here. The challenge of attaining our proper destiny is to achieve the “ennoblement of character.”²⁰⁰ Bahá'u'lláh states,

From the heaven of God's Will, and for the purpose of ennobling the world of being and of elevating the minds and souls of men, hath been sent down that which is the most effective instrument for the education of the whole human race. [GWB 93]

Either acting through Manifestations or inspiring the supraconscious, the Transcendent sets the standards of what is or is not true, good, just and beautiful; human considerations about utility, pleasure, convenience or rationality are simply irrelevant because the underlying assumption is that God knows us — and what is good for us — better than we know ourselves. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá may be referring — at least in part — to the supraconscious when he instructs us “*to awaken spiritual susceptibilities in the hearts of mankind, to kindle anew the spirit of humanity with divine fires and to reflect the glory of heaven to this gloomy world of materialism*” [PUP 7]. The “spiritual susceptibilities” like the supraconsciousness connects us to the Transcendent or God and thereby helps us understand ethics (the good), law (the just), art (the beautiful) and knowledge (the true) are based on revelation or divine commands or the inspiration of the supraconscious through which we are connected to the Transcendent. This means that ideational ethics are not utilitarian in the material sense, but

rather, in a spiritual sense, seeking to bring us closer to God²⁰¹ by actualizing above all our spiritual potentials. They do not aim at “the greatest happiness or comfort or self-esteem for the greatest number” but rather at living harmoniously with the will of the Transcendent.

Sorokin identifies two kinds of ideationalism. “Ascetic ideationalism” seeks to suppress physical and social needs as much as possible, and often seeks to dissolve rejects the ego or sense of self. The Bahá’í Writings, of course, prohibit extreme asceticism and permanent withdrawal from the world [KA 195]. Sorokin also recognizes what he calls “active ideationalism”²⁰² which seeks to fulfill its spiritual mission by minimizing and controlling but not suppressing physical needs and by seeking to transform or spiritualize itself and the world and everyone in it.²⁰³ This, of course, is the mission which all Bahá’ís undertake as their life’s work. Indeed, towards the end of his life Sorokin published *The Ways and Power of Love* (1954) in which he extolls altruistic and universal love, not only as a necessary social feeling but as an organizing principle for societies and the world as a whole. The affinities with the Bahá’í Teachings are too obvious to require in-depth discussion.

Ideational cultures share other important characteristics. They value self-control of the senses and emotions. They do not view self-expression of feeling as necessarily intrinsically valuable for its own sake. Nor do they see liberty or freedom as an ultimate value in all aspects of life. Rather, they emphasize what Sorokin calls “ideational liberty” or an “inner liberty”²⁰⁴ which concerns reducing demands and restraining desires or surrendering our will to the Transcendent. This emphasis on self-control is clearly evident in Bahá’u’lláh’s statements regarding freedom or liberty.

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition ... Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own

ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness. [GWB 335]

In short, liberty must be “[t]rue liberty [which] consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments” [GWB 336]. God's commandments are “true liberty” because they bring our thoughts and actions into alignment with our true nature or essence as human beings.

Ideational economic beliefs and practices must also reflect or be compatible with revelation and intuition. For example, in the Middle Ages taking interest or usury was forbidden to Christians and the principle of a “just price” was applied to sales of all kinds. The modern principle that price is what the traffic will bear i.e. what people are willing to pay is viewed as an invitation to limitless greed – and, therefore, as damaging to the soul. The Bahá'í Writings also present economic teachings to enact spiritual values in the phenomenal world. Economic principles must reflect that human beings are spiritual entities made in the image of God and in whom “*are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him*” [GWB 177]. In other words, Bahá'í teachings recognize that in economics more than strict economic matters must be taken into consideration. To a certain degree, economics are always a matter of psychology and spirituality, and when these change so will the economic operations. Bringing economics more into line with a spiritual outlook is precisely what ideational cultures do.

From the foregoing survey of the major attributes of ideational cultures, it is clear that the Bahá'í Writings have many ideational attributes. However, for reasons to come, we would not describe the Writings as ideational.

Sensate Culture

Sorokin asserts that “Sensate culture is the opposite of the Ideational in its major premises.”²⁰⁵ It asserts that reality is strictly material/physical and that there are no super-sensory beings and processes of any kind. Truth is wholly empirical and sensory, i.e. all truth-claims must be based on sensory or material evidence that can be subjected to the scientific method with its requirements of quantifiability; objectivity; repeatability and falsifiability. In Sorokin’s words, “The Sensate mentality, knowledge, science, is characterized by materialism, empiricism, mechanisticism, determinism, quantitativism.”²⁰⁶ In other words, all knowledge has a material basis; all material processes are explainable in mechanistic, i.e. cause-and-effect terms which enshrine determinism and reject free will; and only things that can be counted and quantified are real. Conversely, “inner experience — divine inspiration, mystical union, revelation, pure meditation, ecstasy, trance”²⁰⁷ as well as the assistance of the Holy Spirit in acquiring knowledge [PUP 302] are rejected as delusional. At this point it is already clear that the sensory culture-complex and the Bahá’í Writings are incompatible at the most fundamental level vis-à-vis metaphysics, ontology and epistemology. The dismissal of non-sensory, i.e. transcendental ‘being’ like God is not reconcilable with belief in an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscience God Who is the willing creator and organizer of all things; Who gives all things their nature and Who is, therefore, the source of all knowledge. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, of course, rejects materialism as an adequate world-view in his talks at Stanford and compares it to the natural outlook of animals. “*Then why should we go to the colleges? Let us go to the cow*” [PUP 361].

For the sensate cultures, humankind is an entirely physical being which can be studied and known completely by strictly empirical methods. Because we have no soul we have ‘spiritual needs’ which will be shown to have biological explanations nor need we be concerned about the after-life. Furthermore, all

values, e.g. ethical, theological, societal values must be based on sensory evidence; must be testable by scientific means; and must be justified by tangible utilitarian benefits such as health, pleasure (“hedonism”) convenience, power, wealth or other tangible.²⁰⁸ They define ‘good’ and ‘right’ in strictly practical terms. Sorokin writes that the “sensate mentality”

chooses and emphasizes predominantly the sensate, empirical, material values. Eudaemonism, hedonism, utilitarianism, sensualism; the morals of “Carpe diem,” ... Man should seek pleasure and avoid pain; utility is positive, disutility is negative. The maximum pleasure for the greatest number of beings, this is in essence the motto of Sensate moralists. The second characteristic of the moral systems of a Sensate culture type is that they are never absolute, but are always relativistic, varying “according to circumstances and situations.” They can be modified, have no sacred, unalterable, eternal imperatives.²⁰⁹

Obviously, sensate moral relativism is logically incompatible with Shoghi Effendi’s statement that the Manifestation “insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine ... distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings” [PDC 108]. In relativism, “eternal verities” are logically impossible because verities that are eternal are true under all circumstances and from all perspectives. According to the Bahá'í Writings, the *accidental* outward expression of the verities might change, but the *essential* truth always remains. In practical application, the philosophy of materialism supplies the principles on which society, law, economics, science and technology and even the arts are built. In a sensate culture people think primarily in materialist terms on such issues as ‘the good life,’ ‘success,’ a ‘good person,’ a ‘good job;’ the soul or spirit is reduced to physical brain function or to computer soft-ware, spirituality is reduced to feeling good or strong self-

esteem and belief in God to childish fear. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, they confuse ‘value’ which is not necessarily sensory with ‘price’ which can easily be measured.²¹⁰ Naturally, sensate cultures have a strong, natural tendency to atheism and secularism, often in militant forms, as seen, for example, in the new atheist movement. In our view, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sums up the sensate perspective when he says,

Mankind is submerged in the sea of materialism and occupied with the affairs of this world. They have no thought beyond earthly possessions and manifest no desire save the passions of this fleeting, mortal existence. Their utmost purpose is the attainment of material livelihood, physical comforts and worldly enjoyments such as constitute the happiness of the animal world rather than the world of man. [PUP 335]

How compatible is the sensate world-view with the Writings? Insofar as the sensate culture’s thorough-going materialism in metaphysics, ontology and epistemology are concerned, there is no compatibility. The denial of any non-sensory beings, entities or truths cannot be reconciled with the assertion that a non-sensory God, soul and spiritual truths exist – they are logical negations of one another.²¹¹ Claiming that each is valid from its point of view does not actually reconcile their specific contradictions but simply compartmentalizes them in separate boxes where their actual contradictions remain unresolved. However, we might ask if there are certain issues on which the two might be seen as compatible, i.e. two aspects of a whole like the yin/yang symbol. For example, the Bahá’í Writings do not deny the need for an existence free from physical deprivations and disease, a sense of well-being, security and opportunities to earn a reasonable living. Nor do they deny that to some degree utilitarianism, i.e. “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” or the good of the community as a whole is an important consideration. Because of their underlying metaphysics, ontology, epistemology and philosophy of human

nature, the Writings proclaim that these goals cannot be attained by strictly material means but must include the spiritual aspects of existence. In short, the sensate beliefs are necessary but not sufficient. Here is where the reconciliation breaks down because the sensate view cannot by virtue of its materialist metaphysic admit that spiritual entities and beliefs have any role in the quest for well-being. The Bahá'í Writings have no difficulty including the material needs of mankind despite their spiritual foundations whereas the sensate view is logically unable to make any such accommodations.

This last point brings us to Sorokin's integral culture which is precisely a synthesis of the ideational and sensate.

Integral Culture

Sorokin's third culture is the integral culture which dominated Greece in 4th and 5th centuries BCE and Europe during the 13th and 14th centuries CE. Naturally, we must recall that no one culture-complex dominates society absolutely but always exists with ideational and sensate undercurrents at work. In Greece during this time the most influential philosophers were Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, both of whom combined the ideational, intuitive "truth of faith" with the empirical "truth of the senses" to form a coherent philosophy or world-view. Plato's intuitive "truth of faith" concerned the Ideal Forms of which all phenomenal things are shadows as noted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "*Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place [the phenomenal world] is only its shadow stretching out*" [SWAB 178]. In other words, the phenomenal world is merely an image that is dependent on the original and, thereby, less real than the Kingdom which "*is a spiritual realm, a divine world, and it is the seat of the sovereignty of the almighty Lord*" [SAQ ch.67]. For Plato, the Ideal Forms can only be understood by intuition within the limits of human capacity. For Aristotle the "truth of faith" was in the 'forms' i.e. Platonic ideas that are embedded within things, just as the Names of God

are immanently reflected from within things. Plato, Aristotle (and later Thomas Aquinas) and the Bahá'í Writings unite these kinds of truth into a rational and coherent world-view.²¹² Moreover, because integralist truth “combines into one organic whole the truth of the senses, the truth of faith and the truth of reason”²¹³ it has a more complete understanding of reality, and, thereby, is closer to the truth. He writes,

the integral truth is not identical with any [one] of the three forms of truth, but embraces all of them. In this three-dimensional aspect of the truth of faith, of reason, and of the senses, *the integral truth is nearer to the absolute truth than any one-sided truth* of one of these three forms ... The *threefold integral system of truth gives us ... a more adequate knowledge of the reality* Each of these systems of truth separated from the rest becomes less valid or more fallacious.²¹⁴

‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes that “*the grace of the Holy Spirit is the true criterion regarding which there is no doubt or uncertainty*” [SAQ ch.83] thereby showing that without consideration of the spiritual realm, our epistemic processes are inherently incomplete and, therefore, open to doubt. Vis-à-vis the world at large, this means that the current Western, i.e. predominantly sensate culture has an inadequate and thereby misleading concept of reality. Sorokin writes,

the major premise [of integral culture is] that *true reality* is partly supersensory and partly sensory – that it embraces the super-sensory and the super-rational aspect plus the rational aspect and finally the sensory aspect, all blended into one unity, that of the *infinite manifold, God*.²¹⁵

On the basis of this statement, one might conclude that the one-sided sensate view of reality also presents obstacles to thinking about God. As the contemporary debates about God demonstrate, a one-sided view of reality makes it especially

difficult to think coherently about God. A question such as 'Can God lift an object heavier than Himself?' is a good example of confusion between the material with the spiritual.²¹⁶

Finally, both the Writings and Sorokin view humans as dual in nature – as material and spiritual with the spiritual being our higher nature. Sorokin notes that man is “a supersensory and super-rational being,”²¹⁷ who possesses a “supra-consciousness” connecting him to a transcendental reality from which he draws inspiration and understanding. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us that *“In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone”* [PT 61]. For both the Bahá'í Writings and Sorokin ignoring our spiritual or supraconscious we is a devastating mistake because we fail ourselves by not actualizing all our potentials for knowledge and spiritual development.

The kinship of integral culture and the Bahá'í Writings is obvious insofar as they agree on the foundations of metaphysics notably on the dual nature of ‘existence’ which has two aspects or ‘levels.’ The first and primary aspect is the Transcendent i.e. *“transpersonal source ... [that is] providential, guiding culture through history with a definite plan.”*²¹⁸ In other words, the integralist culture not only recognizes a superior Being Who is the source of phenomenal reality and all knowledge about it. It also plays a role in “guiding” human history according to a plan of some kind, i.e. plays a role in humankind’s unfolding history through the inspirations of the supraconscious in particular people. Sorokin’s descriptions of integral culture make no mention of Manifestations of God or prophets; the gifted people inspired through the supraconscious are the closest to that exalted position. The second aspect or level of reality is the phenomenal world, i.e. physical existence, which, as we seen above, is a “shadow” i.e. an image of something more real than itself. Like a shadow it is completely dependent on its original. Both the Bahá'í Writings and integral culture reject any extreme

denials or mortifications of our physical nature as a proper response to living in this shadow world. They advocate a moderate, i.e. balanced approach to self-discipline or self-control. As we shall see below, the Writings and Sorokin's theories also agree that metaphysics is included by a potentialist ontology that characterizes all individual things.

How, we may ask, is Sorokin's theory of culture-complexes relevant to the philosophy of history and the subject of grand narratives and to the Bahá'í grand narrative in particular? Sorokin's answer is clear: cultures and history have empirically demonstrable patterns, they go through empirically demonstrable cycles and show empirically demonstrable progress in our understanding of reality — albeit not in a simple linear form as the Enlightenment thought. Moreover, the three culture complexes dominate societies in an oscillating pattern whereby the decline of one leads to the rise of another. The periods of domination are not always of the same length and no one culture complex is ever absolutely dominant; the two remaining culture-complexes remain active as undercurrents one of which will be 'ready' to take the dominant position by meeting the needs. These three culture-complexes and their alternating periods of dominance in a society constitute what Sorokin calls the "superrhythm"²¹⁹ of history.

This "superrhythm" brings up the issue of progress. Does Sorokin's philosophy of change in history include the concept of 'progress, i.e. improvement in knowledge or social practice? Does history have a direction or is it subject to divine guidance? He clearly rejects the Enlightenment view of an "Omnipotent Evolution and Providential Progress unerringly lead mankind ever nearer to some goal or toward some 'bigger and better' state."²²⁰ Obviously this conflicts with the Bahá'í teaching of "progressive revelation" and belief in an "ever-advancing civilization" under the guidance of the Manifestations.

However as Barry V Johnston points out, in effect, Sorokin re-introduces the concept of progress in another form that turns out to converge with the Bahá'í Writings. Sorokin wanted a solution for the problem that the "superrhythm" of three culture-complexes would simply go on forever without any movement towards ultimate truth or at least towards improvements, expansions, of knowledge and understanding. Without such a direction, without improvement the cycles of history would be rather pointless. Sorokin sees the solution in the periods of integral culture which embrace and connect ideational, sensate and integral views of truth i.e. connected the "truths of reason, senses and faith"²²¹ and thereby gained a broader and deeper understanding of reality. Consequently, integral culture more accurately reflects human nature with its intellectual, sensory and intuitive faculties. Insofar as our understanding of reality has improved, there has been and will be progress in history, although it is not necessarily an unbroken linear progress as imagined by the Enlightenment. Consequently, we conclude that like the Bahá'í Writings, Sorokin recognizes epistemological progress which, in turn, leads to progress in other areas of humanity's existence as new knowledge is applied. In this sense it seems clear that over the long term humanity has advanced beyond its ancestors. This is at least a partial reconciliation between the Writings and Sorokin.

There are several reasons why the dominance of the three culture-complexes oscillates. According to Sorokin, the most important is that in each culture-complex, "the system of truth is partly true and partly false"²²² and as the falsities expand a society has "either to continue the dangerous drift and suffer fatal atrophy or else to correct the mistake"²²³ by adopting a more adequate system of truth. He adds, "Some cultures, like the Graeco-Roman and the Western were able to make such a shift several times; others could not do so."²²⁴ In other words, the inadequacies in each culture-complex help drive the historical process forward.

Furthermore, another reason for change occurs from within the three culture-complexes as well as all other things. The basis of this change is the potentialist ontology the Bahá'í Writings and Sorokin share. The Writings recognize this in their references to the "*potential in the seed*" [PUP 91]; of the sun awakening "*all that is potential in the earth*" [PUP 74]; of the "*virtues potential in mankind*" [PUP 70]; of the inventions "*potential in the world of nature*" [PUP 309]; and of the embryo progressing until "*that which was potential in it – namely, the human image – appears*" [PUP 359]. Sorokin's sociology and philosophy of history is also potentialist. He discusses this under the "principle of immanent change"²²⁵ by which he means that the basis of change is in the potentials or essence immanent in a thing. Each thing possesses "immanent self-regulation and self-direction."²²⁶ The environment can stimulate change but it cannot determine the kind of change we will see. No amount of environmental influence can make a duck manifest the attributes of a donkey. The potentials for such a change are not present. Things are not simply the passive playthings of the environment.²²⁷ As Sorokin says, Sorokin puts it, the essence of a thing "the determining potentialities of the system are the system itself and are its immanent properties."²²⁸ The Bahá'í rejection of "environmentalism" is found not only in its potentialist ontology but also in the spiritual guidance we received from Bahá'u'lláh: the "*the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself*" [GWB 143] even if all others in society oppose him or her. Elsewhere Bahá'u'lláh says of the true believers that they will persevere in faith "*even if all the powers of earth and heaven were to deny Him*" [GDM 55]. Logically, if "environmentalism"²²⁹ or "externalism"²³⁰ are false, then all things – but at least humans – must have some degree of free will. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that

Certain matters are subject to the free will of man, such as acting with justice and fairness, or injustice and iniquity – in other words, the choice of good or evil actions. It is clear and evident that the will of man

figures greatly in these actions. But there are certain matters where man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, failing powers, misfortune, and material loss: These are not subject to the will of man and he is not accountable for them. [SAQ 287]

In the phenomenal world, we are subject to the laws of physical existence but we have the capacity to be spiritually free. Sorokin does not specifically discuss free will but a reading of his texts clearly shows that he assumes it as real and effective.

Finally we should note that more than any other historian — even Toynbee — Sorokin has made a careful study of the “over-ripe” conditions of our sensate culture and its ills.

Pre-Conclusion

Because — as Shoghi Effendi urged us to do — we have examined so many correlations vis-à-vis grand narratives in history, we believe it is fitting to end with a review of some of the aspects which make the Bahá'í grand narrative of mankind's history unique and especially suitable for the religious and cultural divisions in the contemporary world. From our perspective, the doctrine of progressive revelation is the ‘flagship’ teaching of the Faith in regards to a global metanarrative. Numerous other teachings are implicitly present in this doctrine. First, is its hitherto unprecedented religious inclusiveness. Other religions are not merely recipients of good will and toleration, they are incorporated as equal, necessary and essential parts of a single global “meta-religion” of which the Bahá'í dispensation is the latest but by no means the final phase. It is difficult to imagine a more rational and more morally satisfying alternative to the problem of religious and cultural disunity among humankind. Second, embedded in progressive revelation is the concept of progress as primarily spiritual but also as material progress. This also shows that in

the Bahá'í Writings, the idea of progress has a theological basis as a necessary part of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The sequence and nature of different divine revelations depends on the degree of spiritual progress a society has made: "*Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity*" [GWB 87]. In this way their progress is expedited to the next stage. Furthermore, "*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*" [GWB 214], a statement which, in effect, makes spiritual and material progress a religious duty for all. This doctrine is especially suited to a world harshly divided by sectarian prejudices and horrible material inequities. From the foregoing, we observe the objective ethical standard to evaluate individual and collective acts. This avoids the quagmire of ethical relativism which creates confusion because it can justify anything.

Because religion and culture are so intimately connected, progressive revelation leads logically to the conclusion that eventually humankind will be united into a federal global commonwealth united by "one common faith." Religious history — and history in general — exhibit a clearly foreseeable purpose. The clarity of this purpose leads to the next implicit concept in progressive revelation: the Universal House of Justice. If we have a clear goal, then the obvious question is 'How shall we get there?' As noted in our Introduction, the Bahá'í Writings are not limited to mere diagnosis of human history but also provide a prescription for healing the world's ills as well as the institution for putting the healing into practice. Recommending universal love — as Toynbee and Sorokin do — is not in itself a prescription except in the vaguest sense especially in the contemporary world. What humankind requires is a program of practical steps on the practice of love and an institution or vanguard to guide this practice. This is especially true when we think on a global intercultural and international scale. While good will and good feelings are necessary, they are not sufficient in humanity's new

situation. Moreover, the Universal House of Justice develops plans to bring both individuals and societies closer to the goal of unification. Such planning and coordination are necessary because individual action while necessary is not sufficient at this time in history.

In addition, the teaching of progressive revelation also implies the essential oneness of human nature. We cannot expect the world to become united if we do not believe that human nature has certain universal aspects that can be the common basis for unity. The essential oneness of humankind also points to the “eternal verities” i.e. the universal ethical principles on which unity can be established to become the foundation for spiritual evolution. Finally, the harmonization of science and religion as part of our material and spiritual progress since both of them are necessary and inescapable aspects of human existence. The apparent conflict between science and religion is symptom of short-sightedness and lack of true understanding that must be overcome because both of them are undeniable aspects of human nature.

Conclusion

Our conclusion consists of four major points.

First, the Bahá'í Writings present a well-developed, spiritually based grand narrative of human history that lays the foundations for the unification of humankind.

Second, the Bahá'í Writings share numerous similarities with the historical theories of Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin but go much farther in developing spiritual and practical responses to the problems explored in these other grand narratives. Unlike the other grand narratives, the Bahá'í Writings provide not only a description or diagnosis of the historical process but also a prescription or plan of action and an institution to put these plans into action as guided by Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of

God for this age. This institution is the Universal House of Justice.

Third, the grand narratives we have studied show that it is necessary to adopt a “world-embracing” vision to observe the identifiable patterns and trends exist in the historical process and that using these patterns it is possible to make testable predictions about future trends. The existence of these patterns based on a universal human nature allows greater understanding of our position in the historical process. Perspectives that are too narrowly specialist do not serve us well vis-à-vis the global aspects of human history.

Fourth, the various attempts to undermine and invalidate grand narratives are often logically self-contradictory; unscientific vis-à-vis the use of statistics; inaccurate in their presentation of human nature; and motivated more by political than scholarly concerns, especially in the case of Popper and the postmodern philosophers. None of the arguments against grand narratives present insuperable obstacles for advocating the Bahá’í grand narrative.

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- . *Tablet of the Universe*; emphasis added. Original Tablet in *Makátib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp 13-32. Anonymous translation. bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih
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NOTES

- ¹ Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, in *Scholarship*, p. 17; emphasis added;
- ² Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, 21, October, 1943 in *Scholarship*, p. 4' emphasis added.
- ³ Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, 5 July, 1949, in *Scholarship*, p. 11; emphasis added.
- ⁴ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, dedication page: "In memory of the countless men women and children ... who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny."
- ⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- ⁶ The 'Big History' movement begins its deliberations with the Big Bang and proceeds through evolution to human history.
- ⁷ Kelly Boyd, *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 1245.
- ⁸ Our remarks are confined to those grand narratives that apply to humanity as a whole, not to a particular nation, as for example with Sima Qian (China, circa 100.B.C.) and Ibn Battuta (14th Century CE).
- ⁹ Matthias Reidel, "A Collective Messiah," www.revistamirabilia.com/sites/default/files/pdfs/2012_01_03.pdf
- ¹⁰ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* quoted in Gilderhus, *History and Historians*, p. 53.
- ¹¹ Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, p. 53.

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- ¹² Ian Kluge, “Kant’s ‘Perpetual Peace’ and the Bahá’í Writings,” in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 13, 20012 or at www.bahaiphilosophy.com/kant-s-perpetual-peace-and-the-baha-i-writings.html
- ¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, translated by Lewis White Beck, “Introduction,” emphasis added. www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/universal-history.htm
- ¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, translated by Lewis White Beck, 8th Thesis; emphasis added.
- ¹⁵ Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, #4, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch01.htm and Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duehring*, Part 3, Chp. 2 www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm
- ¹⁶ This paper uses the new translation of *Some Answered Questions*. As far as the philosophical aspects of *Some Answered Questions* are concerned, there are no conceptual, terminological and argumentative differences between the older version and the new one.
- ¹⁷ World History Association, Mission Statement, www.thewha.org/about-wha/history-mission-and-vision-of-the-wha/
- ¹⁸ WHA, “Areas of Specialization,” www.thewha.org/about-wha/areas-of-specialization-in-world-history/
- ¹⁹ David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*.
- ²⁰ Grinin, Korotayev, Rodrigue, editors, *Evolution: A Big History Perspective*, p. 269.
- ²¹ Juan J. Gomez-Ibarra, *A Scientific Model of History*.
- ²² Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein and Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Theory: An Introduction*.
- ²³ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, p. 7.
- ²⁴ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* p. 7.
- ²⁵ J.R. MacNeil and W.H. MacNeil, *The Human Web: A Bird’s-Eye View of World History*.
- ²⁶ Vladimir Alaykin-Izvekov, “Civilizational Science: The Evolution of a New Field,” in *Comparative Civilizations Review*, Spring, 2011. See also Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*.
- ²⁷ Speaking of religions in general, Bahá’u’lláh says, “All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose.”
- ²⁸ Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians*, p. 156.
- ²⁹ It is essential to understand that rejecting a claim to knowledge is not the same thing as a rejection or a devaluing of the person making the claim. This is a common error. The consultation process works to avoid this

confusion by disassociating a statement from the person making the statement.

- ³⁰ For an in-depth discussion, see Ian Kluge, “*Reason and the Bahá’í Writings*” in Lights of Irfan, Vol. 14, 2013 or www.bahaiphilosophy.com/published-articles.html
- ³¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.31.
- ³² Bahá’u’lláh is not only the Manifestation for this age but also the inaugurator of the next cycle of human development beyond global unity over the next 500,000 years.
- ³³ Moojan Momen, *The God of Bahá’u’lláh*, www.bahai.org/documents/essays/momen-dr-moojan/god-bahaullah; emphasis added.
- ³⁴ “The shrewdness of God” is, of course, reminiscent of Hegel’s “the cunning of history” but I felt that ‘cunning’ has too many negative connotations to use in connection with God. For Hegel, too, history works through the convoluted twists and turns of human action to a pre-determined end.
- ³⁵ One of the best contemporary books on this is *Human Universals* by anthropologist Donald E. Brown. See also *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*.
- ³⁶ As the French poet Lautreamont says so memorably: such an attempted union of absolute differences would be like the chance meeting of a sewing machine and umbrella on an operating table.
- ³⁷ Examples of medical differences between ethnic groups are Tay-Sachs disease which is largely found among Ashkenazi Jews of Europe; sickle-cell anemia which is primarily found among Africans and African-Americans; and cystic fibrosis which is mainly found in European-Americans.
- ³⁸ Robert P Edgertopn, *Sick Socities*, p. 43.
- ³⁹ Pitirim Sorokin as a similar vision of the alternation of sensate, ideational and integral culture types.
- ⁴⁰ Bahá’u’lláh: “*I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life*” [HW Ar. #4]
- ⁴¹ J.R. McNeil and William H McNeil, *The Human Web: A Birds-Eye View of World History*.
- ⁴² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, “Of Miracles,” Part I.
- ⁴³ Ian Kluge, *July 9, A Dramatic Monologue*.
- ⁴⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*.
- ⁴⁵ French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, similarly links natural and human evolution in *The Phenomenon of Man*.

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- ⁴⁶ The Writings accept Aristotle's theory of four-fold causation. This has numerous consequences, including a way to reconcile religion and science.
- ⁴⁷ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 113.
- ⁴⁸ In our understanding, Shoghi Effendi means that the emphasis of political evolution should no longer be on the establishment of new nations because that increases "The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty" [WOB 202]. International divisiveness increases the likelihood of war or regressive economic conflicts.
- ⁴⁹ Ian Kluge, "Reason and the Bahá'í Writings" in *Lights of Irfan* Vol 14, 2013. www.bahaiphilosophy.com
- ⁵⁰ *Qur'án* 8:30 in *Lawḥ-i-Sultan* (Guardian, Browne) Provisional translation.
- ⁵¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, l. 159–165.
- ⁵² Hegel, *General Introduction* in *The Philosophy of History*, trans by Robert S Hartman, III, 2, c. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/introduction.htm
- ⁵³ For a complete list with specific references, see Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" in *Lights of Irfan* 4 (2003) and Ian Kluge, "Bahá'í Ontology: Part One: An Initial Reconnaissance" in *Lights of Irfan* 6 (2005) and "Bahá'í Ontology: Part Two Further Explorations, Vol. 7 (2006); or www.bahaiphilosophy.com .
- ⁵⁴ Alexander Skutch, *The Golden Core of Religion*.
- ⁵⁵ Ian Kluge, "From Tolerance to Unity" *The Bahá'í and Conviviality* in *Living Traditions and Universal Conviviality* edited by Roland Faber and Santiago Slabodsky.
- ⁵⁶ Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 4, 2003 or bahai-library.com/series/Irfan and www.bahaiphilosophy.com
- ⁵⁷ To argue that in living things, DNA is the physical potential simply pushes the problem back into an infinite regress. From what did DNA arise and get the ability to determine development? As a result of this infinite regress we eventually conclude that something non-material, i.e. an essence must be part of the explanation.
- ⁵⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.34.
- ⁵⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- ⁶⁰ Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, the dedication page.
- ⁶¹ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 3.
- ⁶² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 2, p. 269.
- ⁶³ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 2, p. 270.
- ⁶⁴ Arnold Toynbee, quoted in "Toynbee" in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume 7/8, p. 153.

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- ⁶⁵ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2, p. 278; emphasis added.
- ⁶⁶ W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History*, p. 45.
- ⁶⁷ W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History*, p. 49.
- ⁶⁸ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 214.
- ⁶⁹ W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History*, p. 71. We might note in passing that if the basis of history is the “science of human nature” then grand narratives have at least a scientific basis, and, in the Bahá’í case, represent a close convergence of science and religion.
- ⁷⁰ A *Review of General Psychology* survey, published in 2002, ranked Maslow as the tenth most cited psychologist of the 20th century; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Maslow
- ⁷¹ Abraham Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being*. 1962.
- ⁷² Donald E Brown, *Human Universals*, p. 6. Brown adds “the study of universals has been effectively tabooed as an unintended consequence of assumptions that have predominated in anthropology and other social sciences.” p. 6.
- ⁷³ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, p. 433-439.
- ⁷⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 132.
- ⁷⁵ William H. McNeil, *Mythhistory and Other Essays*, p. 73.
- ⁷⁶ William H Dray, *Philosophy of History*, p. 5; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁷ Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 55; original emphasis.
- ⁷⁸ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* p. 8 and throughout the book.
- ⁷⁹ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 155-156; emphasis added.
- ⁸⁰ British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper one of Toynbee’s severest critics described “Toynbee's work as a “Philosophy of Mish-Mash.” Pieter Geyl described Toynbee's ideological approach as “metaphysical speculations dressed up as history” Walter Kaufmann also sharply rejected Toynbee. Jean-Francois Lyotard, who invented the term ‘grand narrative,’ made the rejection of such narratives an integral part of postmodernism. www.liquisearch.com/arnold_j_toynbee/reception_and_criticism
- ⁸¹ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, p. 133 – 134; emphasis added.
- ⁸² William H McNeil, *Mythhistory and Other Essays*, p. 79.
- ⁸³ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History*, p. 89.
- ⁸⁴ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History*, p. 134.
- ⁸⁵ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History*, p. 134.
- ⁸⁶ W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction*, p. 166. 6

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- ⁸⁷ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 1.
- ⁸⁸ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 2.
- ⁸⁹ Neil McInnes, "The Great Doomsayer," in *The National Interest*, Summer, 1997. nationalinterest.org/bookreview/the-great-doomsayer-oswald-spengler-reconsidered-915
- ⁹⁰ Neil McInnes, "The Great Doomsayer", in *The National Interest*, Summer, 1997. www.questia.com/read/1G1-19657029/the-great-doomsayer
- ⁹¹ Wikipedia, "The Decline of the West," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Decline_of_the_West#Reception
- ⁹² Adda B Bozeman, "Decline of the West? Spengler Reconsidered" in *VQR*, Spring 2016, vqronline.org/essay/decline-west-spengler-reconsidered
- ⁹³ W. Reed Smith, "Megalopolis versus Social Retardation: The Continuing Relevance of the Views of Spengler and Toynbee on the Variability of the Rate of Cultural Change," in *Comparative Civilizations Review* 61, Fall 2009. journals.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/CCR/article/viewFile/12966/12830
- ⁹⁴ Mehdi Mozafari, *Globalization and Civilization*, 2002; www.questia.com/read/108216509/globalization-and-civilizations
- ⁹⁵ Neil McInnes, "The Great Doomsayer", in *The National Interest*, Summer, 1997.
- ⁹⁶ John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Doom: Spengler on World History and Politics*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.
- ⁹⁷ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 31.
- ⁹⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 148.
- ⁹⁹ W. Reed Smith, "Megalopolis versus Social Retardation: The Continuing Relevance of the Views of Spengler and Toynbee on the Variability of the Rate of Cultural Change." in *Comparative Civilizations Review*.
- ¹⁰⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 59.
- ¹⁰¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 118.
- ¹⁰² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 118.
- ¹⁰³ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 118.
- ¹⁰⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 174.
- ¹⁰⁵ Spengler spent part of his university studies in advanced mathematics.
- ¹⁰⁶ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 174.
- ¹⁰⁷ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 233.
- ¹⁰⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 118.
- ¹⁰⁹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 310.
- ¹¹⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 359.
- ¹¹¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 310.
- ¹¹² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 310.

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- ¹¹³ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 310 – 311; emphasis added.
- ¹¹⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 418.
- ¹¹⁵ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 464.
- ¹¹⁶ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 118.
- ¹¹⁷ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 174.
- ¹¹⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 174.
- ¹¹⁹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 174.
- ¹²⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 179.
- ¹²¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 179.
- ¹²² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 37.
- ¹²³ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 124–127.
- ¹²⁴ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 127.
- ¹²⁵ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p.17.
- ¹²⁶ Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 55; emphasis added.
- ¹²⁷ This term was introduced by Wilhelm Dilthey in his theory of historical studies.
- ¹²⁸ William H Dray, *Philosophy of History*, p. 5.
- ¹²⁹ The Universal House of Justice, 1997, July 20, “*Scholarship and Related Subjects*.” Ocean.
- ¹³⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 4.
- ¹³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 76, Article 1, Objection 3.
- ¹³² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p.14.
- ¹³³ This is the Kantian – or solipsistic – side of Spengler and much contemporary philosophy: all things are locked into their own perspectives. This view has become a political and social ideology in the 21st Century.
- ¹³⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 57.
- ¹³⁵ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, 1981.
- ¹³⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 234; *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 60; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 14, 59 89, 256, 286, 313, 423; *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108, 202, 203, 294, 295;
- ¹³⁷ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 189.
- ¹³⁸ The Universal House of Justice, 1998, March 19, *Complete Compilation on Scholarship*, Ocean.
- ¹³⁹ The Universal House of Justice, 1997 Jul 20, *Scholarship and Related Subjects*. Ocean.

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- ¹⁴⁰ The Universal House of Justice, 1998 Feb 08, Materialistic Elements in Academic Scholarship, p. 4.
- ¹⁴¹ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 10.
- ¹⁴² See, for example, Global History degrees at Heidelberg www.uni-heidelberg.de/courses/prospective/academicprograms/global_history_en.html or the Oxford University Centre for Global History, global.history.ox.ac.uk/
- ¹⁴³ J R McNeil and William H McNeil, *The Human Web*, 2003.
- ¹⁴⁴ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol.1, p. 292.
- ¹⁴⁵ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 413; emphasis added.
- ¹⁴⁶ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, p. 456.
- ¹⁴⁷ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 44.
- ¹⁴⁸ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 44.
- ¹⁴⁹ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 43.
- ¹⁵⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 3, p. 173.
- ¹⁵¹ This depends on the distinction between appearance and underlying reality and essence and accidental attribute. For an example of this distinction see *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 199.
- ¹⁵² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, p. 358 – 9.
- ¹⁵³ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, p. 57.
- ¹⁵⁴ J.R. McNeil and William H. McNeil, *The Human Web*, p. 6.
- ¹⁵⁵ Stephen Epstein, “History Man” in *The Weekly Standard*, December 13, 2010, www.weeklystandard.com/history-man/article/520688
- ¹⁵⁶ Hugh Trevor-Roper, “Testing Toynbee’s System” in Ashley Montague editor, *Toynbee and History*, p. 122.
- ¹⁵⁷ W. H. Walsh, “The End of a Great Work,” in Ashley Montague, editor, *Toynbee and History*, p. 125; original emphasis.
- ¹⁵⁸ Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians*, p.185.
- ¹⁵⁹ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 4, p. 36.
- ¹⁶⁰ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 97; also *A Study of History*, Volume 1, p. 271.
- ¹⁶¹ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 97.
- ¹⁶² Arnold Toynbee, *A Study in History*, Volume 1, p. 233, states “we must infer that the capacity for civilization is not a monopoly of an fraction or fractions of the human family ... there is no warrant for supposing that one particular fraction – the Black Race – has been born without this birthright and is congenitally incapable of civilization just because it has failed to make one of these creative contributions so far.” Toynbee would probably not have written this if knowledge about the Kingdoms of Kush

or Benin or the Empire of Ghana had been prevalent in his time. It would be fascinating to see how his theories fit these civilizations. In his final, one volume abridgement, Toynbee refers to “the philosophies of the African Civilizations” p. 161; also p. 71.

- ¹⁶³ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 96.
- ¹⁶⁴ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 3, p. 192
- ¹⁶⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 2, p. 322 – 392.
- ¹⁶⁶ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 2, p. 291.
- ¹⁶⁷ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 132.
- ¹⁶⁸ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 138.
- ¹⁶⁹ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 137.
- ¹⁷⁰ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 3, p. 192.
- ¹⁷¹ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 140.
- ¹⁷² Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 12, p. 75.
- ¹⁷³ Ian Kluge, “Reason and the Bahá’í Writings,” in *Lights of Irfan* 14, 2013.
- ¹⁷⁴ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 12, p. 81.
- ¹⁷⁵ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 328.
- ¹⁷⁶ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 1, p. 249; Volume 1, p. 270; Volume 3, p. 125; emphasis added.
- ¹⁷⁷ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 140.
- ¹⁷⁸ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 166.
- ¹⁷⁹ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 334.
- ¹⁸⁰ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 326.
- ¹⁸¹ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 326.
- ¹⁸² Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 326.
- ¹⁸³ CF Volney, *Les Ruins*, in *Oevres Completes*, p. 12 – 13 in Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 161.
- ¹⁸⁴ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 4, p. 245.
- ¹⁸⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volume 4, p. 261.
- ¹⁸⁶ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 161.
- ¹⁸⁷ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 162.
- ¹⁸⁸ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 171.
- ¹⁸⁹ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 180
- ¹⁹⁰ Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, *A Study of History*, p. 194.
- ¹⁹¹ Barry V. Johnston, “Pitirim A. Sorokin on Order, Change and the Reconstruction of Society: An Integral Perspective” in *Comparative Civilization Review*, ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/CCR/article/view/12695

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- ¹⁹² Richard L Simpson, “*Pitirim Sorokin and His Sociology*” in *Social Forces*, (Oxford University Press) www.suz.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:000000000-36d7-41d4-0000-000064b51e55/simpson_sorokin.pdf
- ¹⁹³ Barry V. Johnston, “*Pitirim A. Sorokin on Order, Change and the Reconstruction of Society: An Integral Perspective*” in *Comparative Civilization Review*, ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/CCR/article/view/12695
- ¹⁹⁴ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 15; emphasis added.
- ¹⁹⁵ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 682.
- ¹⁹⁶ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 284.
- ¹⁹⁷ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, II, p. 9.
- ¹⁹⁸ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Basic Trends of Our Time*, p. 29.
- ¹⁹⁹ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Basic Trends of Our Time*, p. 30.
- ²⁰⁰ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Reconstruction of Humanity*, p. 38.
- ²⁰¹ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 111.
- ²⁰² Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 27.
- ²⁰³ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 27.
- ²⁰⁴ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 143.
- ²⁰⁵ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 28.
- ²⁰⁶ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 34.
- ²⁰⁷ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 33.
- ²⁰⁸ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Basic Trends of Our Times*, p. 18; also *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, p. 14.
- ²⁰⁹ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 35.
- ²¹⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Chp. IV, www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm
- ²¹¹ Claiming that each is valid from its point of view does not actually reconcile them but simply compartmentalizes them in separate boxes without solving the contradictions as required by genuine reconciliation. Separating two antagonists does not actually remedy their differences.
- ²¹² Ian Kluge, “*Reason and the Bahá'í Writings*” in *Lights of Irfan 14* (2013) or www.bahaiphilosophy.com
- ²¹³ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 68.
- ²¹⁴ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 690 – 691.
- ²¹⁵ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 18; emphasis added.
- ²¹⁶ The assumed premise is that God is heavy, i.e. is material. That reduces God to a physical object among others which is obviously not God as being discussed.
- ²¹⁷ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Basic Trends of Our Time*, p. 38.

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- ²¹⁸ Pitirim Sorokin in John Ubeursax, “*Culture in Crisis: The Visionary Theories of Pitirim Sorokin*,” in *Satayagraha*, Dec. 10, 2010. satyagraha.wordpress.com, emphasis added.
- ²¹⁹ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 682.
- ²²⁰ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 652.
- ²²¹ Barry V. Johnston, “*Pitirim A. Sorokin on Order, Change and the Reconstruction of Society: An Integral Perspective*” in *Comparative Civilization Review*, ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/CCR/article/view/12695
- ²²² Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 94.
- ²²³ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 94.
- ²²⁴ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, p. 94.
- ²²⁵ R.F. Braun, “*Sorokin, Popper and the Philosophy of History*” in *Intercollegiate Review*, Winter-Spring 1972.
- ²²⁶ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 18.
- ²²⁷ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 631; emphasis added.
- ²²⁸ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 641.
- ²²⁹ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 631
- ²³⁰ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, (abridged), p. 631

Nietzsche and the Bahá'í Writings:

A First Look

Ian Kluge

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify and evaluate correlations between the Bahá'í Writings and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, calls on Bahá'ís “to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to *correlate* them with the modern aspects of *philosophy* and science.”¹ He also says

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can *correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.*²

The Guardian adds,

If the Bahá'ís want to be *really effective in teaching the Cause* they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems. We need Bahá'í scholars,

not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well-read and well-educated people, capable of *correlating our teachings to the current thoughts* of the leaders of society.³

It is worth noting that the Guardian associates effective Bahá'í teaching with the ability to “correlate” current issues in society with the Bahá'í Teachings. Given the enormous influence of Nietzsche's thought and especially vis-à-vis the “new atheism,” finding correlations and correspondences with the Writings is an effective way of introducing the Writings to new audiences. The Universal House of Justice echoes the Guardian's guideline.

Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could *correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings*.⁴

In our understanding, the guidance of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, to “correlate” means to identify connections between different things.⁵ It can also refer to finding correspondences and various degrees of similarity. Finding correspondences or similarities is useful in dialoguing with other beliefs.

While correlations will be our primary focus, we shall, of course, identify and discuss major differences and the Writings and Nietzsche in order to forestall over-identification of the two. After all, the Writings come from Bahá'u'lláh, Who is the Manifestation of God for this age, and, therefore, set the standard for the truth by which to evaluate Nietzsche's work. This difference remains no matter how many correlations we find between the Writings and Nietzsche. Among the most important stumbling blocks contradictions and problems are the master-slave morality, the transvaluation of values, and the

often nasty manner of expression and demeaning tone of Nietzsche's writings. None of these disagreements can be swept away and they will always stand as impediments to an over-identification of the Writings and Nietzsche. However, as we shall explain below, there are different ways of understanding or interpreting these conflicts and how they relate to the correlations.

One of the perennial questions in Nietzsche studies is, 'How can we evaluate and interpret what Nietzsche says?' How can we know, as Robert C Solomon and Kathleen M Higgins put it, "what 'Nietzsche *really* said'?"⁶ Reading him presents a knot of intertwined challenges that are not encountered to nearly the same degree with most other philosophers. The major sources of this problem are, in our view, three-fold. First, as we shall see throughout this paper, are Nietzsche's intellectual self-contradictions, as, for example, the existence or non-existence of a metaphysical substratum to reality. Furthermore, sometimes the *subtext* undermines or flatly contradicts the *apparent* meaning of the text. Second, the foregoing problem is exacerbated by Nietzsche's highly rhetorical and metaphorical style which makes interpretation difficult and easily leads to conflicting views. In addition, Nietzsche's use of exaggeration and bombast which makes it difficult to identify his 'real' position because of the resulting ambiguity.⁷ Third, he writes in a mixture of styles and genres, i.e. he does not consistently present his arguments by step-by-step inferences from premises to conclusions. Styles and genre can include serious extended discussions; shorter 'notebook' entries that are often modified or contradicted by later entries; clever aphorisms, provocations, insults, and ad hominem attacks; quasi-biblical works like *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and philosophical myths such as the master-slave morality.

Obviously, reading Nietzsche is a very complicated business. What is central and essential? What is peripheral and accidental? Is there a 'litmus test' for testing his ideas? One well-known group of philosophers and scholars denies that such a test exists

and that we can find ‘meaning’ or coherent philosophy in Nietzsche’s texts. Among these are Jacques Derrida,⁸ Sarah Kofman,⁹ Karl Jaspers¹⁰, Alexander Nehamas¹¹ and Ruediger Safranski.¹² These scholars agree that there is no single ‘meaning’ in Nietzsche waiting to be discovered. Nietzsche’s texts are essentially an on-going process of discovery in which ideas are suggested and then explored in different contexts and with different issues. Often, they are varied and undermined to lead us to new ideas. Of course, other philosophers and scholars disagree, asserting that to one extent or another, and varying from subject to subject, Nietzsche does, in fact, have a positive philosophy to promulgate. Notable among these are Walter Kaufmann, with his foundational *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*; Robert C Solomon and Kathleen M Higgins, whose book title sums up their position, *What Nietzsche Really Said*; John Richardson who wrote *Nietzsche’s System*;¹³ and Arthur C. Danto whose *Nietzsche as Philosopher* is an early but enduring text.¹⁴ As we can see, the range of Nietzsche interpretation is considerable.

Our study of the Bahá’í Writings and Nietzsche is based on Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1950). We do so for three main reasons. First, this is the book that re-introduced Nietzsche to the English-speaking world by studying him as a philosopher with a coherent foundational idea applied to a large number of issues. Second, Kaufmann’s work has withstood almost seventy years of debate and critique and still remains essential in contemporary Nietzsche studies. Kaufmann’s approach to Nietzsche as a serious philosopher with important ideas has left its indelible mark on Nietzsche studies. Kaufmann’s key idea is that “the will to power is the core of Nietzsche’s thought but inseparable from his idea of sublimation.”¹⁵ Nietzsche’s concept of “sublimation” entails the necessity for self-overcoming to which Nietzsche returns so frequently. In his book, Kaufmann explores the various applications of Nietzsche’s central insight. Sixty years later, the *Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (2009) shows the

endurance and pervasive influence of Kaufmann's belief, stating that "the will to power is characterized by self-overcoming and is life-affirming."¹⁶ Third, using the will to power and its concomitant concepts of sublimation and self-overcoming allows Kaufmann to include almost all of Nietzsche's ideas into a reasonably coherent whole. In our view, his book provides unity or at least more unity than other interpretations.

Are the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche compatible in regards to their final end, goal or ultimate purpose? There is no simple answer to this question. Shoghi Effendi says that "the supreme and distinguishing function of His Revelation, which is none other than the calling into being of a *new race of men*" [ADJ 16, emphasis added]. Certainly Nietzsche's work can agree with this. A "new race of men" is Zarathustra's goal, and his means, i.e. sublimation and self-overcoming correspond — up to a point — with the Writings. However, whether or not Nietzsche can endorse the concept of spiritual development, depends very much on if we accept Nietzsche's atheism at face value. Our interpretation does not for reasons to be seen below.

The major, unbridgeable difference vis-à-vis ultimate goals appears in the Bahá'í goal of establishing a unified, federal world commonwealth united by "*one common faith*" [SAQ 65]. In other words, the current world-order needs to be replaced and the means to this end is the transformation or increased spiritualization of human character and the resulting establishment of new institutions. This contrasts with "Nietzsche's lack of a political philosophy."¹⁷ Certainly, he had political opinions but opinions by themselves do not necessarily make a coherent political philosophy. Even his support for rule by a neo-aristocracy does not deal with the issues a genuine political philosophy must deal with — power and power transfers, hierarchies of responsibility, law and so on — thereby leaving his political thought unformed and largely a matter of speculation. In other words, insofar as Nietzsche has a coherent vision of an institutional order, it is completely incompatible

with the Bahá'í goal of a new world order for all of humankind. This topic will be discussed in more detail below.

As so often with Nietzsche, we require a word about Nazism. The idea that Nietzsche was a precursor or proto-Nazi has few if any supporters in modern Nietzsche scholarship. Tracy B Strong in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* states, “perhaps no opinion in Nietzsche scholarship is more widely accepted than that the Nazis were wrong and/or ignorant in their appropriation of Nietzsche.”¹⁸ Logically, just because the Nazis thought they understood Nietzsche and (mis)used him, does not mean Nietzsche himself was truly a Nazi or proto-Nazi. A parallel error would be to (mis)use Christ’s statement “*Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword*” [Matthew 10:34] to ‘prove’ that He was a warmonger. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* says Nietzsche has received “considerable attention in the English-speaking world as the shadow cast by the travesty of his appropriation by the Nazis and Fascists has receded.”¹⁹ *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* amplifies this point, stating that Nietzsche

gives a large role to the will to power and he proposes to replace the values he attacks with new values and a new idea of the human person (the *Uebermensch* meaning ‘overhuman’ or ‘superhuman’). Although Nazi theoreticians attempted to associate these ideas with their own cause, responsible interpreters agree that Nietzsche despised and unambiguously rejected both German nationalism and anti-Semitism.²⁰

This last point deserves commentary. Extreme German nationalism, imperialism and anti-semitism are three signature doctrines of Nazi theory and rejection of them is absolutely incompatible with being a Nazi or even proto-Nazi. Further evidence for this comes from Nietzsche’s advocacy of cosmopolitanism and interracial intermarriage,²¹ and, as we shall see below, his rejection of party politics, socialism and

mass movements of any kind because they destroy individual independence. The idea that Nietzsche (who died in 1900) was a pre-Nazi or proto-Nazi begins with his sister Elizabeth who was also the literary executor of his work. Unlike Nietzsche, she was a staunch German nationalist and imperialist who funded copies of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* for German soldiers heading to the front in 1914. She was also a fanatic anti-semitic married to a prominent anti-semitic, which is why Nietzsche refused to attend her wedding. She was enthralled with National Socialism and Hitler and encouraged the belief that Nietzsche would have been a follower of the 'new superman.' It is difficult to suppress a smile imagining Nietzsche as a follower of anyone.

As Robert C Solomon and Kathleen Higgins note, it makes no sense to blame any thinker for the abuse of his ideas by others after his death. Among other things, that is a dangerous and infeasible practice that would hold all authors responsible for the misapplication of their ideas. For example, we could blame Darwin for significant portions of Nazi ideology vis-à-vis the survival of the fittest and its applications to individuals and societies. The term 'superman' may have come from Nietzsche but the concept of the 'fittest' animal dominating the others has a distinctly Darwinian ring. In fact, Richard Weikart's²² *Hitler's Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress* relates Nazism to Darwin. In the case of Nietzsche and Darwin, the Nazis misused other people's ideas but this tells us more about the Nazis than it does about these two thinkers. We do not believe that it is fair to taint the work of an author because others mishandled his or her ideas.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that even without the Nazis, a number of Nietzsche's ideas that can be read as advocating rule by and for the violent. His theory of master-slave morality and the transvaluation of values are clearly of this kind. However, three points should give us pause before reacting against passing judgment on his work as a whole. First, we must not throw out the baby with the bathwater: it is hard to see why our antipathy to some of his ideas should prejudice us against his

other ideas. Second, we should recognize that Nietzsche was not always a consistent thinker and these parts of his philosophy are inconsistencies in his thought at least from vis-à-vis the “core,” i.e. the will to power, sublimation and self-overcoming. Third, because they are not compatible with the “core” of Nietzsche’s thought, these inconsistencies cannot logically undermine those parts that are compatible. They do not work from the same premise, i.e. the “core.”

Finally, as a Bahá’í, I am convinced that as a result of Bahá’u’lláh’s mysterious influence, Nietzsche was one of those individuals who felt — albeit unconsciously or “*through a glass darkly*” [1 Corinthians 13:12] — the necessity of transforming ourselves to prepare for the coming end of European civilization and a new world. Shoghi Effendi refers to “those hidden and transforming influences which, from the source of Bahá’u’lláh’s mystic strength, continue to flow with ever-increasing vitality into the heart of this troubled world” [BA 113]. This, of course, is a matter of personal faith, but even for those who do not share my belief, the fact that there are significant correlations between the widely separated Bahá’í Writings from the Middle East and the European bourgeois Nietzsche is, at the very least, of interest in the history of ideas.

2. The Common Foundation Between the Bahá’í Writings and Nietzsche

First appearances notwithstanding, there are at least three major general foundational elements which the Bahá’í Writings and Nietzsche share: (1) the radical critique of modern society as suffering from irreversible social, intellectual, ethical and spiritual degeneration; (2) the absolute necessity for the establishment of a new kind of society and a re-constitution of humankind, and (3) at the most fundamental level, the Aristotelian substratum of their thought.²³

2.1 The World in Decline

Both Bahá'u'lláh and Nietzsche viewed the modern world as being in a degenerating condition, marked by “*selfish disorders, intellectual maladies, spiritual sicknesses, imperfections and vices*” [PUP 204-205]. Not surprisingly, such conditions lead to mass despair, i.e. an overwhelming conviction of the loss of all values, the loss of all hope for the future and the loss of all confidence in ourselves or anything else, including God. Bahá'u'lláh writes, “*The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction*” [GWB 216], and

The world is in travail, and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. [GWB 118, emphasis added; see also KI 12]

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, provides the most comprehensive description of the decaying world order of our time.

No wonder, therefore, that when, *as a result of human perversity*, the light of religion is quenched in men's hearts, and the divinely appointed Robe, designed to adorn the human temple, is deliberately discarded, a deplorable decline in the fortunes of humanity immediately sets in, bringing in its wake all the evils which a wayward soul is capable of revealing. *The perversion of human nature*, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, reveal themselves, under such circumstances, in their worst and most revolting aspects. Human character is debased, confidence is shaken, the nerves of discipline are relaxed, the voice of human conscience is stilled, the sense of decency and shame is obscured, conceptions of duty, of solidarity, of reciprocity and loyalty are distorted, and the very

feeling of peacefulness, of joy and of hope is gradually extinguished. [WOB 187, emphasis added]

The ultimate cause of this universal decay and loss of direction is the failure of spirituality and religion in the lives modern men and women. The first sign of this inner collapse is the rejection of God's Manifestation for this age, the denial of the "*divine physician*" [SWAB 23] Whose task is to renew and revitalize humankind and to help it advance towards its next stage of its psycho-spiritual and social evolution. Another sign of this "perversity" is the inability of humans to recognize their desperate and spiritually impoverished condition. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "*The Hour hath come upon them, while they are disporting themselves. They have been seized by their forelock, and yet know it not*" [GWB 43]. The third sign is inability to understand that

material progress alone does not tend to uplift man. On the contrary, the more he becomes immersed in material progress, the more does his spirituality become obscured. [PT 108]

We cannot find materialist solutions to spiritual problems. This impossible quest only increases despair — and fuels still more desperate efforts to fill the 'hole in the soul' with more 'stuff.' Similarly, Nietzsche realizes that the "Ultimate Man" cannot find happiness in the quest for more psycho-spiritual comfort because the only way to true well-being is the quest for self — overcoming. It is important to note that for both the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche, the origin of the modern crisis is not technological, scientific or political but rather spiritual. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes that Europe faces

[t]he peasant rebellion of the spirit. — We Europeans confront a world of tremendous ruins ... *The church is this city of destruction: We see ... Christianity shaken to its lowest foundations; the faith in ... God has collapsed...*²⁴

Nietzsche identifies nihilism with destruction of values and purpose²⁵ brought on by the end of the Christian church and Christianity itself. The collapse of religion and spirituality leads to what Nietzsche calls "European nihilism."²⁶ In *The Will to Power*, he defines nihilism:

*Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached, first, when we have sought a "meaning" in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the "in vain," insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure – being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had deceived oneself all too long.*²⁷

In words reminiscent of the opening of *The Communist Manifesto*, he announces, "Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?"²⁸ This "guest" is characterized by

Skepticism regarding morality ... Buddhistic, yearning for Nothing ... the air of mediocrity, wretchedness, dishonesty, etc. Nationalism, Anarchism, etc. Punishment. The redeeming class and human being are lacking – the justifiers.²⁹ He adds that moral skepticism is decisive because it "leads to nihilism."³⁰

Noteworthy among these deficiencies is the lack of a "redeeming class and human being" i.e. an inspirational figure who can re-invigorate and mobilize mankind's flagging energies. None of these deficiencies can be cured by material possessions comfort or progress. Providing that required spiritual remedy is the major aim of Nietzsche's philosophy, as seen in Zarathustra's valiant efforts to regenerate and re-energize the "Ultimate Men,"³¹ i.e. the comfort-loving denizens of the valley. In vain, he offers to cure them of their self-contented and materialistic sloth by inner, personal or spiritual transformation won through painful self-overcoming. This is a

significant part of the unavoidable cure for the illnesses of modernity that Bahá'u'lláh offers by “*calling into being of a new race of men*” [ADJ 16]. Of course, in the Bahá'í context this self-overcoming requires recognition of God whereas in Nietzsche, this is, as will be shown below, a matter of interpretation.

For Nietzsche, nihilism has two aspects, a “passive nihilism”³² and an “active nihilism.”³³ “Passive” nihilism is a sign of decreased power, despair, “the weary nihilism that no longer attacks.”³⁴ By contrast “active” nihilism is a sign of increased power and is a “violent force of destruction,”³⁵ i.e. a nihilism that clears away all the traditional beliefs and ideas — all the thoughtless and comforting imitations — that prevent us from actualizing our full potentials as conscious beings. “Active” nihilism corresponds to the Bahá'í concept of destroying not the world but rather of “[T]ear[ing] aside the veils that have grievously blinded your vision and ... scatter the idols of vain imitation” [GWB 142]. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, “None have believed in Him except them who ... have shattered the idols of their vain imaginings and corrupt desires and entered the city of certitude” [GWB 12]. In both the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche we must choose to make a radical break with the past. It is important to notice the strong language used in the Writings — tearing, scattering shattering — to show that spiritual evolution requires great energy and is not always a comfortable process. Nietzsche, of course, uses similar language in this regard.

2.2 The Need for Revolutionary Change

Note: In order to frame the following discussion, it is imperative to point out that the ultimate aim of the Bahá'í dispensation is the establishment of a new world order, i.e. the unification of humankind in a world-wide federal state united by “*one common faith*” [GWB 255] in which the “*spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 7] of humankind are more awake than they are now. Nietzsche, however, has no clear ultimate goal in mind

— although some have inferred such — as we shall discuss below. Therefore, the correspondences between the Writings and Nietzsche are similarities regarding *means* in contrast to differences regarding the ultimate *ends*. It is also important to note that although Bahá'u'lláh's *goal is revolutionary change* in humankind, His *method is evolutionary*, i.e. spiritual, psychological, social development of our “*spiritual susceptibilities which are merciful and heavenly characteristics*” [PUP 244].

In our view, Bahá'u'lláh does not see Himself as yet another reformer whose purpose is to prolong the existence of the old world order by a patchwork of ‘fixes.’ Rather, His goal is to establish a new world order: “*Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead*” [GWB 7]. He takes full responsibility for and makes no secret of the momentous changes destabilizing the world as a prelude to establishing a new world order.

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

In *The Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, He describes the Manifestation as “*fully capable of revolutionizing the world through the power of a single Word*” [TB 259] and calls on humanity to

[c]ast away that which ye possess, and, on the wings of detachment, soar beyond all created things. Thus biddeth you the Lord of creation, the movement of Whose Pen hath revolutionized the soul of mankind. [PB 117]

Here we see the radical — and spiritual — nature of this Revelation, demanding nothing less than a radical break with the past and a total commitment by divesting ourselves of

whatever attaches us to the old world. Bahá'u'lláh even draws attention to the radical or even traumatic nature of His revelation.

the whole creation was revolutionized and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing entities of a new creation... [GWB 295; ADJ 46-47]

It must be remembered that the focal point of Bahá'u'lláh's revolution is spiritual. Unlike revolutionaries in the past, He begins the process of revolution and transformation from within, so that His new world order begins with "a new race of men" who do not simply repeat the errors of the past. Of course the primarily spiritual focus of His revelation does not preclude the daily tasks of mitigating the suffering of individuals or striving for justice in our society. However, these activities are most valuable and reach their fullest potential in the framework of serving the Bahá'í Cause.

One consequence of these tumultuous times is an inevitable struggle with opposing forces. Shoghi Effendi writes,

We have only to refer to the warnings uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in order to realize the extent and character of the forces that are *destined to contest* with God's holy Faith peoples, nations, adherents of *divers faiths*, will jointly and successively arise to shatter its unity, to sap its force, and to degrade its holy name. They will assail not only the spirit which it inculcates, but the administration which is the channel, the instrument, the embodiment of that spirit. [WOB 17, emphasis added; cf. CC2 142, ADJ 41, TDH 123, GPB 411]

Shoghi Effendi also writes of

the burden of the impending contest that must be waged, sooner or later ... between the rising institutions of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic divinely appointed Order, and the exponents of obsolescent doctrines and the defenders, both secular and religious, of a corrupt and fast-declining society. [CF 155]

Shoghi Effendi even assigns responsibility for the start of the inexorable conflict on the way to a new world order:

Our adversaries in the East have initiated the struggle. Our future opponents in the West will, in their turn, arise and carry it a stage further. Ours is the duty, in anticipation of this inevitable contest, to uphold unequivocally and with undivided loyalty the integrity of our Faith. [CF 155, emphasis added]

Given human nature, revolution without contest and conflict is not possible — but the key issue is by what means and towards what end the contest is waged. In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, this “agonistic engagement”³⁶ is waged not by coups, political opposition, subversion or extra-parliamentary movements but by means of new ideas, revitalized values, good personal examples, energized hope, and appeals to the spiritual elements in human nature. The underlying principle is that by the power of example these transformational activities will gradually encourage people to turn their loyalties and activities away from the old world order and turn towards Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It is only in this way— a shift of loyalties — that the Bahá'í Faith can be said to be impact negatively on the old world order. In other words, the Bahá'í Faith will not actively work to weaken or bring down the old world order but rather emphasizes spiritual renewal and personal and social transformation that will allow people to build a new world.

Nietzsche appears to suggest somewhat similar action. Through his fictional character Zarathustra as an ideal example and by means of attacking the West's foundational concepts in

metaphysics, ethics, logic, religion, science and social organization, he aims at clearing away the out-dated and/or unsupportable concepts that prop up the old world order and hinder the arrival of the Superman. Zarathustra says,

O my brothers, am I then cruel? But I say: *That which is falling should also be pushed!*

Everything of today – it is falling. It is decaying: who would support it? *But I – want to push it too!*

... I am a prologue to better players, O my brothers! ... Follow my example!

*And him you do not teach to fly, teach – to fall faster!*³⁷

The essential message here – the dramatic flare and hyperbole aside – converges with the Bahá'í Writings in rejecting reform and desiring revolution and a future that is not merely a repetition of the past in a different disguise. Their method is similar – up to a point. The shift of loyalties suggested in the Writings is dedicated to building a positive new order, but does not mandate action against the old order as Zarathustra does by encouraging us to push it down.

2.3: The Rejection of Politics

Both the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche reject partisan political activity as a viable way of changing the world. Shoghi Effendi says,

Bahá'ís should remember that *we stand above politics*. That that field does not interest us; that we attribute importance to things of the spirit, that we await salvation to come from the Faith that burns in our hearts. [LDG 47-48]

Of course, non-participation in partisan politics does not mean Bahá'ís should not engaged in positive works to help individuals or striving for justice but we must be sure that

neither we nor the Faith are being co-opted for partisan purposes. Moreover, non-participation in partisan politics does not mean that the Bahá'í Writings do not have certain principles vis-à-vis governance. They make it clear, among other things, that free, open and democratic government is better for human progress than autocratic government [PUP 197]; that elected parliaments are good – if conducted properly [PUP 73; SDC 17]; and that undue centralization is a source of ill [PUP 167]. However, partisanship is to be avoided because it is 'partial' by nature whereas the Bahá'í focus is on the good of the whole. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

universality is of God, Bahá'ís in every land are ready, nay anxious, to associate themselves by word and deed with any association of men which, after careful scrutiny, they feel satisfied is free from every tinge of partisanship and politics and is wholly devoted to the interests of all mankind. [BA 125, emphasis added]

In the words of Shoghi Effendi, “[t]he bonds which hold together the body-politic are not sufficient” [JWTA 43] to unify a nation – or the world. They hold mankind back from its destiny as a global commonwealth.

R. Kevin Hill notes that “Nietzsche rejects all the political ideologies on offer, from left to right as delusions, ‘convictions’ with no foundation.”³⁸ Politics as practiced in Europe during his time no longer serve any useful purpose: “the time for small politics is gone,”³⁹ a point also emphasized in his disparaging reference to “*the wretched gabble of politics and nationalism and nationalism.*”⁴⁰ Indeed, his contempt for politics is expressed even more strongly: he describes it as a “*prostitution of the spirit.*”⁴¹ Nietzsche scholar Ted Sadler states,

For Nietzsche as for Heraclitus, politics is one of the most overestimated things in the world, mainly because it caters for the instincts of the common,

unphilosophical natures who are always in the majority. *Politics stands in opposition to the radically individualizing character of philosophy* expressed in Heraclitus' statement [Diels-Kranz: Fragment 246] 'I searched out myself.'⁴²

Like Bahá'u'lláh, Nietzsche is no mere reformer; he has no confidence in contemporary partisan politics or in political revolutions to solve the problems of nihilism and societal decay. Both insist that we must not confuse and conflate the desire to make revolutionary changes in society by means of individual transformation in goals and values, with the work of political parties, programs and partisan conflicts. In fact, these two will often work at cross purposes. If people are not inwardly transformed, they will inevitably repeat the very behaviors the revolution was supposed to eliminate.

Like Bahá'u'lláh, Nietzsche rejects the partisan politics but most of his political principles not only contradict the Bahá'í Writings but also contradict other aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy as we shall see below. Unlike the Writings, Nietzsche despised democracy as "not only a deterioration, that is to say, the depreciation of a human type, a mediocratizing and lowering of values."⁴³ Instead, he appears to advocate what Mark Warren calls a "neoaristocratic conservatism ... [that looks] forward to a time when similar cultural aristocracies might be established."⁴⁴ Bruce Detwiler calls Nietzsche's political views "the politics of aristocratic radicalism"⁴⁵ which establishes rule by the most powerful and ruthless. It is not hard to find evidence for such beliefs in Nietzsche who writes,

Every heightening of the type "man" hitherto has been the work of *an aristocratic society* — and *thus it will always be*; a society which believes in a long ladder of rank order and value differences in men, *which needs slavery in some sense* ... To be sure, *we must not yield to humanitarian self-deception* ... *Men whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every frightful sense of the*

word, men of prey ... such men threw themselves upon weaker, better-behaved, more peaceable races ... The distinguished caste in the beginning was always the barbarian caste; their superiority lay not primarily in their physical but in their psychic power; they were more whole human beings (which on every level also means “more whole as beasts”).⁴⁶

Nietzsche approves of the aristocrats for their leadership because they “heighten[ed] “the type of ‘man.’” In other words, the human race as a whole benefits by their rule. Even if violence is only instrumental at the start of their ascent and their real superiority lay in “their psychic power” the fact remains that they seize and keep power by violence for such is the nature of life itself. Nietzsche writes,

Life is essential assimilation, injury, violation of the foreign and the weaker, suppression, hardness, the forcing of one's own form upon something else, ingestion and — at least in its mildest form — exploitation ... life is simply will to power ... “Exploitation” is not a part of a vicious or imperfect or primitive society; it belongs to the nature of living things.⁴⁷

In other words, Nietzsche justifies the aristocrats as realists who accept the conditions of natural life and take advantage of them.⁴⁸ This is simply incompatible with the Bahá'í vision of a new world order.

For Nietzsche, the struggle for domination is based on the universally present will to power which is ontologically integral to life. Being ontologically integral to life, it cannot be removed without eliminating life itself. Consequently, for Nietzsche “exploitation” “suppression” or domination i.e. “the forcing of one's own form upon something else” does not necessarily mean a society is “primitive” or “vicious” as most ethical systems would assert. These are natural and necessary activities. In Nietzsche's view, the aristocrats ought to rule

precisely because they have attributes listed above and they accept the nature of reality without any shame and/or guilt, and therefore the aristocrat

feels himself the value-determining; he does not need to be ratified; he judges that “which is harmful to me is harmful as such; he knows that he is the something which gives honor to objects; he creates values ... his morality is self-glorification.”⁴⁹

In our view, Nietzsche’s ideas on the will to power in regards to politics have at least two inherent problems which not only conflict with his other teachings but also conflict with the Bahá’í Writings. First, his neo-aristocratic views contradict his doctrine of continuous self-overcoming.⁵⁰ A ruling class without interest in self-critique and self-evaluation, i.e. a ruling class which sincerely experiences itself and whatever it does as “the good” is unlikely to engage in self-overcoming since the necessary ‘good’ has already been achieved. The problem is that for Nietzsche the ethics of self-overcoming “distinguish[] the moral from the nonmoral [person].”⁵¹ Furthermore, as Kaufmann notes, “self-criticism, i.e. man’s critical reflection on his own intentions and actions – is the core of morality.”⁵² The inescapable conclusion is that Nietzsche’s aristocrats are inherently immoral not by Christian standards but the standards set by Zarathustra who is – supposedly – the prime embodiment of Nietzsche’s ethics. The same conclusion follows from Bahá’í ethics in which self-overcoming is also essential to creating “new race of men” [ADJ 16].

2.3.1 Loyalty to the Earth

The second problem concerns the relationship between morality and nature, a subject on which Nietzsche is deeply conflicted. On one hand, he justifies the cruelties of his aristocracy by appealing to nature, thereby falling into the Humean fallacy of confusing ‘what is’ with ‘what ought to be,’

i.e. of confusing 'description' with 'prescription' and 'knowing what is the case' with 'endorsing what is the case.' Describing and prescribing (endorsing, obligating) are not logically equivalent. Just because Alexis always cooks supper at our house does not mean that Alexis *should* always cook supper at our house. Just because mother rabbits sometimes eat their young in times of danger does not mean that we can justify human mothers doing the same. In other words, Nietzsche wants to base his ethics on nature, on what is 'natural' as part of his philosophy of loyalty to the earth. Nietzsche admonishes us to

remain true to the earth and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners whether they know it or not ... *To blaspheme the earth is now the dreadful offence*, and to esteem the bowels of the Inscrutable more highly than the meaning of the earth.⁵³

There are two problems here. First, self-overcoming is not part of the natural order of things; a crocodile is what it is and does what it does and shows no sign of trying to be 'better' in some way. This loyalty to earth also conflicts with the 'transcendental impulse' we see in his work. Second, it is not necessarily true that belief in the existence of a "superterrestrial" world devalues and degrades the earth and our earthly existence. Why would any believer in God denigrate the Creator's work? That would, in effect, be an attack on the Creator Himself. Nietzsche fails to recognize that there is an essential difference between being excessively attached to the Creator's work and being attached to the Creator. Condemning the undue attachment to nature, i.e. God's work, condemns a faulty response to nature but does not devalue creation itself. Nietzsche's claim that belief in a "superterrestrial" world is in itself a devaluation of the natural world is contradicted by the Bahá'í Writings: "*How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that*

surge within a drop!" [GWB 177] Furthermore, there is Bahá'u'lláh's condemnation of asceticism and monasticism: they impede the full celebration of earthly life and the divine gifts it offers:

Living in seclusion or practising asceticism is not acceptable in the presence of God. It behoveth them that are endued with insight and understanding to observe that which will cause joy and radiance. [TB 71]

It is worth noting that Bahá'u'lláh emphasises the "joy and radiance" of earthly life just as Nietzsche does. Moreover, He clearly condemns such practices as originating in "idle fancy" and "superstition" [TB 71] and, thereby, unmasking them as distortions of human existence. Moreover, since the Bahá'í view of human life is a process view, i.e. a character-building⁵⁴ journey from earth to the endless spiritual evolution of the Abhá Kingdom, there is no rationale for devaluing the necessary first step of pilgrimage. Without the first step, the others are impossible; indeed, in a process view past steps are implicitly included and even raised to a higher level. Nietzsche's reasoning on this matter does not hold.

However, there is another, in effect, opposing line of thought about nature in Nietzsche. Zarathustra's demand for self-overcoming i.e. self-transcending requires us to tame and transform our natural, animal impulses into something higher. That is why Nietzsche says,

The *spiritualization of sensuality* is called *love*: it is a great triumph over Christianity. A further triumph is our spiritualization of *enmity*. It consists in profoundly grasping the value of having enemies: in brief, in acting and thinking in the reverse of the way in which one formerly acted and thought.⁵⁵

We must transform, or sublimate⁵⁶ animal lust into love and spiritualize our conflicts. As Kaufmann notes, Nietzsche "used

another word side by side with sublimation: *Vergeisterung*, spiritualization.”⁵⁷ We should not view our enemies in the natural way and rise above our impulses to find value in our foes. We must go beyond nature — as is already obvious in Nietzsche’s advocacy of self-overcoming to be better humans, not better animals. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “*The Prophets come into the world to guide and educate humanity so that the animal nature of man may disappear and the divinity of his powers become awakened*” [PUP 41]. It is also noteworthy that Nietzsche’s statement about enemies converges with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s admonition:

Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines. [SWAB 1]

4: Master and Slave Morality

The issue of Nietzsche’s “aristocratic radicalism” brings us to one of the most challenging, controversial and thought-provoking aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy — master and slave morality as presented in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. This is one of the places where the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche can only be reconciled to a limited degree.

In outline, Nietzsche’s theory is simple enough. There exist two kinds of morality, i.e. on one hand, the morality of the ruling aristocrats, nobility and masters, and, on the other hand, the morality of the slaves i.e. the subservient classes of people. Nietzsche’s description of the masters is provocative: they are hard, proud, intolerant of weakness, self-confident, challenge-seeking, war-like, active and energetic, strong, bluntly truthful about themselves and the world, and focused on law and what is right. In direct contrast, slave morality values the useful i.e. the comfortable and advantageous over the right; it values

weakness, kindness and compassion, humility, patience, equality of all things as well denigrating earthly life in favor of a heavenly life after death.

According to Nietzsche, these two moralities clash — although one of them, i.e. slave morality, is the victor in the modern world. Nietzsche links this historical downfall with the rise of the priestly class in Judaism and Christianity which he identifies with slave morality. However, it is essential to remember that to one degree or another, the struggle between the two kinds of morality continues within us today.⁵⁸

Nietzsche's views on this subject are summarised in the following passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

All the world's efforts against the "aristocrats," the "mighty," the "masters," the "holders of power," are negligible by comparison with what has been accomplished against those classes by the Jews — the Jews, that priestly nation which eventually realised that the one method of effecting satisfaction on its enemies and tyrants was by means of a radical *transvaluation of values*, which was at the same time *an act of the cleverest revenge*. Yet the method was only appropriate to a nation of priests, to a nation of the *most jealously nursed priestly revengefulness*. It was the Jews who, in opposition to the aristocratic equation (good = aristocratic = beautiful = happy = loved by the gods), dared with a terrifying logic to suggest the contrary equation, and indeed to maintain with the teeth of the *most profound hatred (the hatred of weakness)* this contrary equation, namely, "*the wretched are alone the good; the poor, the weak, the lowly, are alone the good; the suffering, the needy, the sick, the loathsome, are the only ones who are pious, the only ones who are blessed, for them alone is salvation* — but you, on the other hand, you aristocrats, you men of power, you are to all eternity the evil, the horrible, the covetous, the

insatiate, the godless; eternally also shall you be the unblessed, the cursed, the damned!"⁵⁹

Before proceeding, we hasten to add that this passage is not an anti-Semitic outburst — Nietzsche openly despised anti-semitism especially in his sister and brother-in-law; rather, it is an observation of a historical turn of events, i.e. the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 CE by which Christianity and its slave morality became the only authorized religion in the Roman Empire. This event marks the success of the slave revolt and the “transvaluation of values.”

The Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche's master and slave morality are incompatible for at least one reason: the Writings identify the “slave morality” with the ethical teachings of the Manifestations of God and the “master morality” with the proud and corrupt rulers and leaders of the world to whom Bahá'u'lláh wrote admonitory epistles. In other words, the Bahá'í Writings favor what Nietzsche calls “slave morality”: the morality of the weak, the oppressed, the humble, the compassionate, and the long-suffering as well as the values of dedication to God, unselfishness and service to others. Conversely, the Manifestations have sought to overcome the unself-critical, unreflective self-satisfaction of our animal natures that marks the cruelty and ruthlessness of beasts — and Nietzsche's master class.

Unlike Nietzsche, the Manifestations understood the superiority of the ‘slave’ morals insofar as they maintained the ethics of self-overcoming which “distinguishes the moral [person] from the nonmoral [person].”⁶⁰ Kaufmann notes that “self-criticism, i.e. man's critical reflection on his own intentions and actions — is the core of morality.”⁶¹ In contrast, of master morality shows it to be painfully smug, self-satisfied and arrogant even about inflicting violence and, therefore, highly unlikely to lead to the kind of self-critical awareness required for self-overcoming. Ironically, Nietzsche's own standard of self-overcoming means that the aristocracy fails

Nietzsche's test for being moral. In sharp contrast, the slave morality with its intense awareness of its own weakness and other deficiencies is far more likely to be open to the process of self-overcoming and, thereby, according to Nietzsche's own standards, becomes more fit to rule.

Once again, we face a division in Nietzsche's philosophy. On one hand we have the "master-and-slave" morality justified by a ruthless vision of life:

What is life? — Life — that is: continually shedding something that wants to die. Life — that is; *being cruel and inexorable* against everything about us that is growing old and weak — and not only about us. Life — that is, then: *being without reverence* for those who are dying, who are wretched, who are ancient? Constantly being a murderer? — And yet old Moses said: "Thou shalt not kill."⁶²

The mocking tone of "old Moses" — far more derisive in German than in English — makes clear his contempt for the attributes of slave morality. On the other hand we have On one hand, there is Zarathustra, the exemplar of what humankind should become, i.e. a bridge to the Superman, who engages in constant self-overcoming, who preaches to the "last men" in hopes of awakening the adventure of self-overcoming, who is hard on himself and does not always sing his own praises, who uses the power of words to attain his goals, not violence and who has no real interest in dominating others by force.

Walter Kaufmann tries to avoid this dilemma by suggesting that Nietzsche "would like us to conform to neither [master nor slave morality] and become *autonomous*,⁶³ i.e. grow beyond both. However, it is difficult to see how being "autonomous" prevents us from having to make choices that either agree more with the stark differences between master and slave morality and their respective consequences. Moreover, it is also difficult to see how one can — or would want to — grow beyond self-

overcoming (to what?) and compassion. As soon as we adopt these in any way, we are forced to abandon the master morality. In our view, there is a genuine conflict in Nietzsche's thought on this matter and there is no choice but to recognize one or the other as being consistent with the whole body of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Can the Bahá'í Writings be brought into alignment with Nietzsche's master-slave-morality? In our view, no direct agreements or convergences are evident. However, we find some tenuous parallelism between certain ideas, i.e. we can find ideas that are different in content but fulfill some of the same functions. We might also think of mirror images in which one is the reverse of the other. As we understand the Writings, Nietzsche's concept of 'domination' must be replaced by the concept of 'service,' i.e. the 'leaders' or 'aristocrats' serve humankind. They are 'masters' in the art of promoting spiritual evolution. Thus, both the Writings and Nietzsche have a concept of rank i.e. ways of distinguishing ourselves by special attributes and/or actions but these work in antithetical ways. One obvious difference is that for Nietzsche there is a relationship of enmity and forceful, even violent domination between the masters and slaves. In contrast, in the Bahá'í Writings the 'leaders' neither rule nor dominate nor regard others as foes and inferiors nor are they part of a permanent class. They lead by force of good example and exemplary behavior, by obedience to Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, by constant striving to develop their "*spiritual susceptibilities*" [PUP 7] and in service to others. Among Bahá'ís case, the 'masters' themselves are 'slaves' insofar as they ultimately seek to serve God and not themselves. It is, so to speak, a quest to be part of an 'aristocracy of slaves'!

The Bahá'í Writings themselves encourage this sense of spiritual competition to serve.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*Happy the soul that shall forget his own good, and like the chosen ones of God, vie with his fellows in*

service to the good of all” [SDC 115]. Bahá’u’lláh says, “*Vie ye with each other in the service of God*” [MOTC 123]. The Universal House of Justice tells us that Bahá’u’lláh “encouraged a competitive spirit in its noblest form.”⁶⁴ In short, the Writings and the guidance from the Universal House of Justice recognize the value of spiritual competition in service.

To the objection that this sounds too combative, we point out that there is an agonistic aspect in the Writings as already seen in Shoghi Effendi’s warnings about future “contests” with opposition to the Faith. Furthermore, lower animal traits can be transformed and transvalued into higher, more spiritual traits. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, reminds us that greed – an animal trait – can become a prized spiritual characteristic.

greed, which is to ask for something more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is used suitably. So if a man is greedy to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous and just, it is most praiseworthy. [SAQ 214, emphasis added]

The same principle underlies the use of military imagery in the Writings. For example, in one of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prayers we read:

These souls are Thy heavenly army. Assist them and, with the cohorts of the Supreme Concourse, make them victorious, so that each one of them may become like unto a regiment and conquer these countries through the love of God and the illumination of divine teachings. [TDP 35, emphasis added]

In another prayer he says,

Confirm me in Thy service, assist me with the cohorts of Thy angels, make me victorious in the promotion of Thy Word and suffer me to speak out Thy wisdom amongst Thy creatures. [BP 187, emphasis added]

In the world-view presented in the Writings – and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* – the many of the qualities of the ‘masters’ can be spiritualized i.e. transformed and transvalued to achieve higher goals than mere earthly dominion. They continue the never-ending process of self-overcoming by being cruel and relentless to themselves in defeating their stubborn weaknesses and self-deceptions.

Unlike Nietzsche’s masters, his exemplary hero Zarathustra could agree with much of what the Writings say on the issue of service as well as with the following by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

O people! Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch. At most it is this, that some souls are ignorant, they must be educated; some are sick, they must be healed; some are still of tender age, they must be helped to attain maturity, and the utmost kindness must be shown to them. This is the conduct of the people of Bahá. [SWAB 28]

At the beginning of his journey down the mountain, Zarathustra, tells the old man in the forest, “I love mankind”⁶⁵ and answers the old man’s objections by saying, “I am bringing mankind a gift.”⁶⁶ His mission is to educate, to heal, to mature and to show his insights with a sincere heart and kindness. In effect, he comes down to serve in agreement with the words of Bahá’u’lláh that “*The people are ignorant, and they stand in need of those who will expound the truth*” [TB 170]. If there is an ‘aristocracy’ in the Bahá’í Writings, it is an ‘aristocracy’ of service – certainly not an aristocracy of power, domination and harshness.

To conclude: the Bahá’í Writings and Nietzsche are reversed mirror images of each other in regards to ‘masters’ and slaves.’ Both embody the concepts of ‘rank,’ ‘contest’ and ‘leadership’ but one does so in the service of self and the other in the service of humankind and God. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s aristocrats dominate by force and live in a state of enmity with

others. They are also part of a permanent class structure and are centered on themselves as highest form of human existence. Their actions are justified in and of themselves. This stands in sharp contrast to the Bahá'í understanding of leadership in terms of service to humankind with the purpose of helping all develop their highest "*spiritual susceptibilities*" [PUP 7] both as individuals and as members of society. There is no permanent ruling class.

5: The Bahá'í Writings, Nietzsche and Aristotle

The pervasive presence of Aristotelian metaphysics and ontology in both the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche identifies another important area of agreement and convergence between the two. Because of this common foundation, the correlations between the Writings and Nietzsche are not serendipitous coincidences but — for the most part — the outcome of working with the same philosophical concepts in analyzing and explaining reality. At this point it must be said that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have affirmed the validity of certain Aristotelian concepts — especially in metaphysics and ontology — by using them extensively throughout the Bahá'í Writings.⁶⁷ Similarly, in the case of Nietzsche, numerous authors have detected Aristotle's influence, among them Kaufmann, Richardson, Solomon, Hough, Silk and Stern, Emden and Williams.⁶⁸ Since Nietzsche was a trained philologist specializing in Greek and Latin supports the belief that he was at least passingly familiar with Aristotle's major principles.

The Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche use Aristotle's ontology of potentials to analyze, understand and explain reality. Of course, this ontology implicitly includes all the major elements of Aristotelian metaphysics. Let us see how. For Aristotle, potentials are (a) the ability or power of a thing to initiate or stop change in oneself or others⁶⁹ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.⁷⁰

Moreover, every single thing or kind of thing is identified and limited by its particular combination of potentials. That is why we cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. It lacks the potentials for such a transformation. Furthermore, the essence of a thing is the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and/or individual from other kinds and/or individuals.

Little reflection is needed to see that the ontology of potentials also implies the concept of 'actuality' or what a thing is at a specific moment as distinct from what it can/will be in the future. This, in turn, implies the distinction between appearance — what a thing is at any particular moment — and its reality, i.e. its full albeit 'bundle' of potentials both actualized and unactualized. Anything that has its own unique 'bundle' of potentials is a 'substance' i.e. something that stands by itself and is not an attribute of something else. "Silver" the Lone Ranger's horse, is a substance because he is not a quality of some other thing. The ontology of potentials also implies the existence of 'force' or 'power' — or 'will' in Nietzsche's language — to actualize a potential, i.e. cause change within oneself or in others. Finally, the ontology of potentials requires that all things have a goal, a 'telos' i.e. a certain preferred direction or goal towards which things develop. Maple trees never grow into lobsters. The potentials a thing has limit what it can become, i.e. set it towards certain goals. Nietzsche, of course, claims to have rejected these concepts as part of a now irrelevant philosophical past, but numerous passages show that in fact, he consistently made use of them either explicitly or implicitly.

Aristotle's ontology of potentials — including teleology — is most dramatically illustrated in Zarathustra's command, "Become what you are!"⁷¹ This command only makes sense on the assumption that we have an essence made up of certain potentials unique to us as members of the human race and as human individuals. It requires the distinction between appearance, i.e. what we are now, and reality, i.e. our

unactualized potentials. Furthermore, this command requires free will in order to struggle for a goal within our range of potentials. In addition, this command only makes sense if we have an essence that is stable, i.e. is continuous enough to be given instructions that can be meaningfully followed over a period of time, i.e. has continuity through change. In short, it must have identity or ‘being’ or be a ‘substance.’ Thus it appears that Nietzsche did, albeit implicitly – or perhaps inadvertently – accept the concepts of potential, essence, goals, free will, cause-and-effect, the distinction between appearance and reality and substance since without them, a significant portion of his philosophy of self-overcoming would lose its logical and ontological foundations.

Another appeal to essences – and implicit to potentials and the ontology of potentials – is what Nietzsche says at the end of *The Will to Power*. He tacitly assumes the reality of essences – and by implication potentials – by saying, “*This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power and nothing besides!”⁷² This statement plainly asserts that in their essential natures, the world, all beings in it and all human beings are the will to power. However, the matter does not end here. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes,

The world seen *from within*, the world defined and designated according to its “intelligible character” – it would simply be “Will to Power,” and nothing else.⁷³

This claim, identifies the ‘inner’ essence of the world and its “intelligible character” as the will to power even though it does not appear as the will to power. In other words, it establishes the distinction between appearance and reality. The same Aristotelian ontology of potentials and essence is present in the following:

The victorious concept of “force,” by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still

needs to be completed: *an inner will* must be ascribed to it, *which I designate the "will to power,"* i.e. an insatiable desire to manifest power, or as the employment and exercise of power as a creative drive, etc.⁷⁴

Nietzsche's objections to the concept of 'essence' notwithstanding, this is essentialism, i.e. the view that all things have an inner nature which, in Nietzsche's view is "will." Consequently, we can always look 'though' the outward appearance of a thing and deduce the reality, the "intelligible character" of a particular thing while observing the will to power in one of its particular modes. We may see this will to power in a stone or a pike or a baby but in each case the essence operates under the same mandate, to 'become what it is.' In light of the foregoing discussion, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Nietzsche's overt denial of concepts like essence,⁷⁵ free will, teleology and the ontology of potentials is cannot be taken at face value because he implicitly re-introduces them in the course of his major teachings.⁷⁶

The Bahá'í Writings harmonize with those aspects of Nietzsche that make use of the ontology of potentials, essence and the appearance/reality distinction. The ontology of potentials is one of the foundational philosophical ideas in the Bahá'í Writings as seen in the following:

Man is the microcosm; and the infinite universe, the macrocosm. The mysteries of the greater world, or macrocosm, are expressed or revealed in the lesser world, the microcosm. The tree, so to speak, is the greater world, and the seed in its relation to the tree is the lesser world. But the whole of the great tree is potentially latent and hidden in the little seed. When this seed is planted and cultivated, the tree is revealed. Likewise, the greater world, the macrocosm, is latent and miniaturized in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man. This constitutes the universality or perfection of virtues potential in mankind. [PUP 69]

In this passage, mankind's relationship to the universe is explained in terms of hidden potentials and actualization or revealing of the hidden. There is the present actuality or appearance and the future actuality after latent potentials have been actualized. Bahá'u'lláh states,

Consider, moreover, how the fruit, ere it is formed, lieth potentially within the tree. Were the tree to be cut into pieces, no sign nor any part of the fruit, however small, could be detected. When it appeareth, however, it manifesteth itself, as thou hast observed, in its wondrous beauty and glorious perfection. [GWB 155]

Once again we observe the appearance/reality distinction: the actual appearance is the tree but the tree's reservoir of potentials or essence remains hidden until actualized in the fruit. Of course, the Writings apply these ideas to the role of the Manifestations in human history:

The holy Manifestations of God come into the world to dispel the darkness of the animal, or physical, nature of man, to purify him from his imperfections in order that his heavenly and spiritual nature may become quickened, his divine qualities awakened, his perfections visible, his potential powers revealed and all the virtues of the world of humanity latent within him may come to life. [PUP 465]

From this it follows that the doctrine of progressive revelation also fits into the ontology of potentials. As seen above, humankind contains latent attributes or potentials and as these are actualized under the guidance of various Manifestations, humankind makes spiritual and material progress.

Nietzsche also agrees with the Writings insofar as we should "become what [we] are" – indeed, one might well argue that enabling us to do so is the whole point of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Unless we humans become what we really are,

instead of living hypocritically by professing one thing and doing another, we hinder our growth personally and collectively. This raises the question, 'Who, really, are we?' and to that, the Bahá'í answer is clear:

As for the spiritual perfections they are man's birthright and belong to him alone of all creation. Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy. This spiritual longing and perception belongs to all men alike, and it is my firm conviction that the Western people possess great spiritual aspiration. [PT 73, emphasis added]

Because of our essentially spiritual nature, human beings have a spiritual destiny or vocation in this world (and beyond) and our true happiness is fulfilling this nature no matter how hard this may be. How could we be happy if we are, so to speak, living against ourselves by forgetting that our residence in nature, while a necessary part of our development, is only temporary? The task of being a Bahá'í is the task of becoming our spiritual selves.

There is no question that the Bahá'í Writings see all things endowed with an essence (as described by Aristotle as a reservoir of potentials) and, therefore, connect with the implicit recognition of essences in Nietzsche's work. In *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* Bahá'u'lláh tells us that "*the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge*" [KI 29-30, emphasis added; cf. SAQ 195]. Here is a partial list of things which the Writings identify as having an essence: God [GWB 187; PUP 326]; the human soul [GWB 160]; humankind [GWB 164]; justice [GWB 167]; "*all created things*" [GWB 302]; beauty [GWB 321]; species of living things [GWB 300; cf. SAQ 184]; truth [GWB 328]; religion [PUP 344]; "*this new age*" [PUP 326]; and the spirit [SWAB 167]. Indeed, references to 'essence' are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "*inmost reality*" [GWB 65]; "*the realities of*" [GWB

63; PUP 39]; “*reality of*” [GWB 64; cf. PUP 39]; “*inner reality*” [SVFV 55]; and “*inner realities*” [SWAB 57]; also refer to the essence of things.

It should be noted that the concept of ‘essence’ does not deny the relational or — as we shall see below — the process nature of things and bestow them with “an intrinsic non-relational character.”⁷⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states,

For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. [SAQ 178]

In general terms, things, including their essences, are relational, i.e. they exist as part of a complex of relations. However, this does not preclude essences. The essence of a particular thing is made up of a certain set of relations — and not a different set of relations. The relations that make up a human being are not the same relations as those that make up a horseshoe crab with its blue blood. In short, there is no logical contradiction between relationality and essence.

Aristotle’s ontology of potentials — and by extension the Bahá’í Writings’ and Nietzsche’s — implicitly embodies other Aristotelian concepts such as substance. For Aristotle, a substance is a thing that exists independently of other things, or, a thing that is not an attribute of something else and a thing that continues through change, i.e. a continuant. For example, a horse exists independently — it does not die if the farmer dies — and it is not a quality that something else has nor is it a different horse tomorrow than it is today. Some of its non-essential attributes may have changed but a slight graying of the mane or a thinner belly does not make it a different horse because there is an observable — or filmable — continuity from birth until today. We shall explain the false contradiction between being and becoming below. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses this definition of substance to prove the immortality of the soul:

Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident – that is to say, the body – be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains. [SAQ 239]

Because the soul is a 'substance' in the Aristotelian sense, it exists independently of the body or, conversely, the body is an accidental attribute of the soul and needs the soul to actually be a body and live. Obviously, the soul-substance is a continuant and because it is not an attribute of the body, can exist without it.

Nietzsche's views on 'substance' are ambiguous, i.e. overtly denying the validity of this concept and covertly using it. He writes,

Insofar, however, as all metaphysics has had principally to do with *substance* and freedom of will, one may designate it the science that treats of the fundamental errors of mankind – but does so as though they were fundamental truths.⁷⁸

His words notwithstanding, the problem is obvious: without the Aristotelian concept of substance, Nietzsche's philosophy encounters fatal obstacles. For example, Nietzsche describes the will to power as the essence of all things,⁷⁹ manifesting in everything in the phenomenal world – and, thereby, the will to power that persists through all kinds and all changes is a continuant, i.e. a 'substance' in the Aristotelian sense. Nor is the will to power as such an attribute of anything else, nor does it depend on anything else for its existence. Therefore, one of Nietzsche's key concepts is an example of what he explicitly denies. The same argument can be applied to Zarathustra and the Superman. Once again, we find that the implicit content of his work is in full agreement with the Bahá'í Writings while his explicit statements are not.

6: Process Philosophy⁸⁰

Aristotle's ontology of potentials solves the ancient philosophical problem, of the apparent conflict between 'being' and 'becoming' and, thereby creates one of the connecting points between the Writings and Nietzsche who seems to deny that the concept of 'being' has any validity: "Heraclitus will always be right in this, that being is an empty fiction."⁸¹ 'Being' refers to the continuity of a thing, to the retention of identity⁸² according to Aristotle. In contrast 'becoming' refers to the changes a thing undergoes, i.e. a process of actualizing its potentials and changing from one state or condition to another. Thus, Aristotle's ontology of potential tells us that the traditional absolute dualism between 'being' and 'becoming' is false. Nothing is ever in just one condition or the other: a sprouting sunflower seed actualizes its particular sunflower potentials and, by doing so, is *being* or *be-ing* a sunflower seed. Or, we could say a plant is being a sunflower by becoming more of a sunflower as more of its various potentials are manifested. In regards to Nietzsche, this means there is no basis to the argument that Aristotle's alleged philosophy of being is intrinsically incompatible with Nietzsche's philosophy of becoming. In more general terms, process philosophies are not necessarily irreconcilable with philosophies of being.⁸³

Both the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche are based on a process metaphysics, i.e. a philosophy that is based on the principle that reality is fundamentally constituted by change. The Writings explicitly state:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose — that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence . . . This state of motion is said to be essential — that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their

essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn ... ?

Thus it is established that this movement is necessary to existence, which is either growing or declining. [SAQ 239]

According to the Bahá'í Writings, motion, i.e. change, i.e. the actualization of potentials is an essential attribute of all existing things. Indeed, a dialectical process between the present actual form of something and the potentials that are trying to actualize and to develop new forms is always underway. In fact, these dialectical 'battles' constitute all things as what they are. The moment this process stops, a thing stops existing. According to Kaufmann, in Nietzsche's "dialectical monism" "will to power ... is always at war with itself."⁸⁴ In humankind this might appear as a dialectic between "reason and impulse"⁸⁵ or between the drive for self-overcoming and the fear of suffering. Here, too, the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche are similar insofar as Nietzsche sees an inner conflict as we have already seen in the doctrine of self-overcoming. He rejects "being" which he identifies with stasis. The "opposition and war" refers to this inward struggle of self-overcoming.

I retained some doubt in the case of Heraclitus in whose proximity I feel altogether warmer and better than anywhere else. The affirmation of passing away *and destroying*, which is the decisive feature of Dionysian philosophy; saying yes to opposition and war; becoming along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of *being* — all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else ...⁸⁶

6.1: Agreement on Teleology

Nietzsche's overt denials of teleology notwithstanding, teleology plays an essential role in his thought. Indeed, because the teleological strain in Nietzsche's philosophy is so clearly evident, Nietzsche scholar R. Kevin Hill says that Nietzsche's

work shows “in nature a teleological tendency towards the production of higher human beings: artists, philosophers and saints.”⁸⁷ John Richardson adds,

I take it to be evident from the expression itself that ‘*will to power*’ is a *potency for something, a directedness towards an end* ... Nietzsche, despite his repeated attacks on (what he calls) teleology really has such a theory himself: the beings or units in the world are crucially *end-directed* and to understand them properly is to grasp how they’re directed or aimed. Above all, it’s to grasp how they’re aimed at power, an end *essential to them*.⁸⁸

For his part, Nietzsche states:

But all expansion, incorporation, growth means striving against something that resists; motion is essentially tied up with states of displeasure; that which is here the driving force must in any event *desire something else* ... For what do the trees in the jungle fight each other? For “happiness” – For power!⁸⁹

In his view, whatever we do is motivated – consciously or not – by the purpose of increasing power. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, we can see the implicit teleological influence at work when he says:

I teach you the Superman. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?

All creatures hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ebb of this great tide, and return to the animals rather than overcome man?⁹⁰

“Creating something beyond themselves” is the goal towards which all beings are naturally oriented. Humans are encouraged to mobilize, i.e. actualize their capacities or potentials in order

to “overcome” themselves as they presently are to become something better or to clear the way for something better. That is what “all creatures hitherto” have done, and is, by implication, the natural destiny of humankind. Failing in this regard, means we are no longer acting as ‘natural’ beings and have become something ‘unnatural’ by missing our natural teleological destiny.

The Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche agree on the teleological nature of all things, which is to say, all things are goal-oriented. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “*All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees*” [SAQ 199]. This process of actualizing their potentials is, in fact, their being or be-ing (the process remains constant) and shows that they are teleological in nature, i.e. there is a natural progression from potential or latency to actualization. The difference between humans and a seed is that we must strive for our goal consciously whereas the seed does so unconsciously or automatically. Not only are individual lives teleological but so is the collective life of humankind:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth. [GWB 215]

Here Bahá'u'lláh lists some of the moral potentials humanity should actualize as it fulfills its goal achieving progress. Humans must not “*act like the beasts of the field*” because doing so conflicts with our spiritual nature and is, in effect, a betrayal of ourselves because our essential spiritual nature remains unactualized [PT 72]. Humans — indeed, all beings — can only be happy when they actualize their appropriate potentials — which is precisely their goal. Indeed, actualizing our higher, specifically spiritual potentials is, in effect, the Bahá'í

‘definition’ of happiness. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*True happiness depends on spiritual good and having the heart ever open to receive the Divine Bounty*” [PT 108]. Opening our hearts to God or awakening our “*spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 7] is, of course, our chief spiritual potential.

7: Nietzsche’s “Alleged Atheism”⁹¹ – The Death of God

Although Nietzsche is probably the world’s most famous atheist, we shall demonstrate that his atheism is highly ambiguous. In fact, Roy Jackson aptly characterizes Nietzsche as “a ‘sort’ of atheist.”⁹² What he destroys with one hand he restores with the other. We should add that Nietzsche’s ambiguity about religion and the transcendent is no surprise. It is already evident in his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* in which he uses two Greek gods, Apollo and especially Dionysus, as concrete symbols of transcendental powers of order and exuberance.

Metaphysically speaking, Nietzsche is not an atheist. It is true that he overtly rejects the personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but in *The Will to Power*, he offers a metaphysical description of the will to power in language that effectively re-creates the ‘God of the philosophers,’ i.e. something with all the ontological attributes of God. The will to power underlies and is present in everything; it is unlimited power; it has no beginning or end; it is mysterious and unknowable; and it is beyond space and time. Moreover, it is absolutely independent of each of the forms in which it manifests itself, i.e. it depends on nothing and, therefore, cannot be constrained by anything. It is super-natural because nothing in nature has any of these attributes. We need not belabor the point that in the Bahá’í Writings, God possess all of these ontological attributes.

At the end of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes,

And do you know what “the world” is to me? Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself ... as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness: this, my Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my “beyond good and evil,” without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal; without will, unless a ring feels good will toward itself – do you want a name for this world? A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? – This world is the will to power – and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!⁹³

In Nietzsche's view, this ground of being is amoral, i.e. beyond good and evil. However, the Bahá'í Writings reveal a convergent idea – namely that God “*doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth*” [GWB 116]. In other words, God – or the will to power – determines what is good or not and thereby shows Himself to be “beyond good and evil.” This idea is illustrated by Bahá'u'lláh's statement “*Shouldst Thou regard him who hath broken the fast as one who hath observed it, such a man would be reckoned among them who from eternity had been keeping the fast*” [PM 67]. The disagreement between the Writings and Nietzsche arises as a result of giving mere humans, i.e. the aristocrats and nobles, the same power of deciding their own morality on their own intrinsically limited human terms. This is logically unjustifiable because they lack the qualifications i.e. God's absolute independence from all external influence and constraint and His complete knowledge of human nature that entitles them to make decisions for all. Without these qualifications, their moral choices are, in the end, self-serving and arbitrary and will inevitably have to be

maintained by force. Moreover, Nietzsche's description of the will to power cannot hide one obvious implication: its creativity and the gift of existence to all things as well as the fact that existence is freely given since we are not there to earn it. This creativity and ontological generosity can easily be the basis of positive moral principles insofar as this super-natural munificence provides a model for human behavior.

Nietzsche's atheism is very tentative. For example, in *The Gay Science*, the Madman says, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" — and then suggests that we must become gods to be worthy of this great act.⁹⁴ Even in such a forthright declaration, we can detect signs of what we call the 'transcendental impulse' in Nietzsche's work, an inclination expressed in both ideas and word choice to re-introduce the divine or transcendental into our consciousness and our understanding of life. There is nothing about the death of God, i.e. atheism, which logically demands that we should take God's place by becoming gods.

Here is an example of Nietzsche's ambiguous language from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, written in the 'chapter and verse' style of the Bible and showing the 'transcendental impulse' in his word choice. Speaking of the "Sublime Men,"⁹⁵ Zarathustra says,

To be sure, I love in him the neck of the ox; but now I want to see the *eye of an angel*, too.

He must unlearn his heroic will, too: he should be an *exalted* man and not only a *sublime* itself should raise him up, the will-less one!

He has tamed his monsters, he has solved riddles: but he should also *redeem* his monsters and riddles, he should transform them into *heavenly children* ...

Then your *soul* will shudder with *divine* desires; and there will be *worship* in your vanity!

This indeed is the secret of the *soul*: only when the hero has deserted his *soul* does there approach it in dreams – the superhero.⁹⁶

The religious tenor of his word choice is supported by the narrative of the entire *Thus Spake Zarathustra* itself: Zarathustra, a Moses-like prophetic figure descends from his mountain retreat – like Moses bringing His gifts of new commandments and wisdom – by which humans may continue their evolution to make way for a higher being called the Superman. In the idea of becoming gods, he invokes *Genesis* in which the Serpent promises Eve, “*Ye shall be as gods*” [Genesis 7:1-5]. In short, the Serpent promises to help Adam and Eve to transcend their human condition. Throughout his work, there are constant references to words such as ‘spirit,’ ‘holy’ and ‘soul’ words whose ambiguous sacred and non-sacred connotations display Nietzsche’s ambiguity in regards to the transcendent. The following statement also his use of religious language even when repudiating Christian morality:

Every act of contempt for sex, every impurification of it by means of the concept of ‘impure’ is the crime *par excellence* against life – is the *real sin against the holy spirit of life*.⁹⁷

However, the convergences between the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche about God go even further than a common belief in a transcendental entity. In our view, Nietzsche missed and loved religion so much he struggled to create, if not a new religion of his own, then at least an adequate substitute world-view. For example, he sees the collapse of religion as the basis of the modern crisis. Nietzsche refers to “the end of Christianity”⁹⁸ and the Writings state “as a result of human perversity, the light of religion is quenched in men's hearts” [WOB 187]. This belief logically implies that religion provides something necessary for the well-being of human beings and without religion (for whatever reason) humankind suffers and

degenerates. Paradoxically, Nietzsche seeks a Christ-like ‘redeemer.’ He says of the Superman — whose name alone carries transcendent connotations — “Behold! I teach you the Superman: he is the sea, in him your great contempt can go under.” In this description, the Superman is truly super-human, i.e. the sea into which we can save ourselves from overwhelming self-contempt. Like Christ, he can take our sins on Himself [1 Peter 2:24]; the Superman can take into himself our contempt for ourselves and thereby offer us new opportunities for growth. This, too, points to transcendence for no natural human being can do such a thing. This suggests that the Superman is not entirely natural and somehow beyond nature. Ironically, this implication of the Superman violates Zarathustra’s own injunction to be loyal to the earth and to deny the supernatural. Moreover, the need for a ‘redeemer’ converges with the Bahá’í teaching that Manifestations of God are necessary for humankind to progress. The pervasive presence of this ‘transcendent impulse’ helps give a religious dimension to a thinker who is — superficially perhaps — anti-religious.

Nor should we overlook that the “eternal return” is itself strongly tinged with religious and transcendental colors. Seen in a religious light, it seems much like a non-Christian version of heaven and hell. R. Kevin Hill states

the doctrine of eternal recurrence is best understood as a replacement for the Christian doctrine of an afterlife of rewards and punishments. Recurrence is like a reward for those who live well and are strong and a punishment for those who live badly and are weak.⁹⁹

Seen as a metaphysical doctrine,¹⁰⁰ i.e. a doctrine about the basic nature of the universe, the eternal return reveals its transcendental nature by imposing on the universe the supernatural attribute of lasting forever. No empirical observation has ever encountered such an object in nature. So much for remaining loyal to the earth! In effect, the eternal return claims that the universe is beyond time since the same results occur

again and again. Such timelessness is precisely one of the attributes of God in the Writings. Furthermore, the absolute repetition inherent in the eternal return also means there is no essential change – an attribute which converges with the Bahá'í belief that God is not subject to change. On a strictly empirical basis, Nietzsche was bound to reject these attributes – and the fact that he did not, highlights his ambiguity about religious beliefs. But this ambiguity deepens. On the basis of scientific knowledge of his time, Nietzsche would have known that the random collision of atoms, i.e. collisions that were causally unconnected to each other, would not necessarily have brought about the eternal return. If the collisions are truly random, i.e. not determined by any preceding event or object, then there is no necessity whatsoever that today's world will ever return in its exact present form. In fact, in a world of genuinely random actions, there is no necessity of any kind at all: things just happen without being conditioned, i.e. limited by foregoing events or other objects. The concept of the “eternal return” only works if we tacitly assume that atoms have been bestowed with suitable nature and that laws of nature exist – which inevitably leads to the issue of how these attributes and laws originated. In other words, Nietzsche slipped into transcendental thinking, i.e. thinking that implicitly includes God. There is nothing in our empirical, earthly experience on which such concepts can be based for which reason we may say the “eternal return” itself is an example of the ‘transcendental impulse’ in Nietzsche.

Of course, it may be argued that Nietzsche does not mean ‘transcendent’ in any non-physical way, especially in light of his command to “remain true to the earth.”¹⁰¹ But that is exactly the point; as we have shown above by examining Nietzsche's language and thought, he cannot live up to his own ideal – he is fundamentally conflicted and the Transcendent as Jaspers calls it, is present throughout much of his work. This presence is exactly where the Bahá'í Writings make contact with Nietzsche.

In light of Nietzsche's 'transcendental impulse' it is highly improbable that he was an 'atheist' as usually understood: a person who denies any transcendent powers. It is far more likely that "Nietzsche means the god of transcendental monotheism and Christian morality ... it is the 'God' of Judeo-Christianity who is dead, but the divine is something totally different."¹⁰² From a Bahá'í perspective, this idea poses no difficulties as long as we understand that Nietzsche is not making an ontological claim about the existence or non-existence of God or a ground of being but rather is making a sociological claim about the role of God in the lives of individuals and societies. In other words, he is saying – among other things – that the concept of God no longer plays any significant role in the modern world, that people have more confidence in themselves, in government and in science and technology than they do in God or in their own faith in God. He is also pointing out that organized religion, its institutions, its hierarchies and theologies have become corrupt and feeble.

The Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche agree on the 'death of God' if taken as the recognition that genuine religion – as distinct from its superficial outward appearances – is no longer a major force among modern individuals and societies in the modern world. Free thought, i.e. the independent investigation of truth, is imprisoned by the clergy. As already noted, Bahá'u'lláh recognizes that "*The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land*" [GWB 199]. Speaking of Islam and Christianity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that only the "*form has remained in the hands of the clergy*" [SAQ 47].

For both the Writings and Nietzsche, the renewal of humankind involves an unavoidable struggle against clergy who seek to retain their power. Both seek to overcome the clergy, but even as Nietzsche clearly aims at the destruction of priesthood, he still feels a certain kinship and pity with them, admitting, "There are heroes even among them; many of them have suffered too much: so they want to make others suffer ... I want to know my blood honoured even in theirs."¹⁰³ In a similar

attitude of reconciliation, the Writings invite the clergy to join the Bahá'í dispensation.

Wherefore flee ye? The Incomparable Friend is manifest. He speaketh that wherein lieth salvation. Were ye, O high priests, to discover the perfume of the rose garden of understanding, ye would seek none other but Him, and would recognize, in His new vesture, the All-Wise and Peerless One. [TU 6]

8: Self-overcoming

One of the central concepts of ethical practice in the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche is 'self-overcoming,' i.e. taking an active part in actualizing one's own potentials, removing undesirable traits and increasing their powers and capacities. Self-overcoming is Nietzsche's strategy for defeating nihilism which, in his view, is corrupting and destroying modern culture. This converges with the Bahá'í Writings belief that "*Man must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moralities, new capacities*" [PUP 536]. Obviously, when we gain "new virtues and powers" our powers will be expanded.

Both in the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche we see what may be called "ethics of power,"¹⁰⁴ i.e. an ethics of the growth of power in the sense of 'capacity.' The ultimate purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's guidance is allow us to expand our power, i.e. to "*awaken [our] spiritual susceptibilities*" [PUP 7] and make possible both spiritual and material progress. This requires conscious self-overcoming and transformation inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's revelation; in the case of Nietzsche, this is achieved by conformity with the will to power. In both cases, humans have to submit to a Power greater than themselves and greater than anything in the natural world. What Zarathustra wants from the people in the valley, does not contradict what Bahá'u'lláh wants from us.

Self-overcoming is crucial for two reasons. First, it is the only way to become a bridge to the Superman because by overcoming ourselves, we remove an obstacle — the present selves we cling to — so that the Superman may advance. Second, self-overcoming is the only way to free ourselves from our weak and cowardly aspects and, thereby, to grow in our pursuit of the will to power and to become one with our essential selves. In short, self-overcoming is necessary to end our alienation from our true identity and, thereby, come into possession of our selves. Like the Bahá'í Writings, Nietzsche endorses the paradox that to become our best selves, we must surrender our current identities. In addition, this “true self” becomes “a shining and wonderful reality” because, in Nietzsche’s terms, it has done what is good, i.e. that which “heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself.”¹⁰⁵

The importance of self-overcoming to Nietzsche is evident in his belief that self-overcoming “distinguishes the moral [person] from the nonmoral [person].”¹⁰⁶ This is more evidence that Nietzsche does, in fact, have a moral code including an objective standard by which to evaluate our actions: the willingness and effort to surpass ourselves, the willingness to suffer the inevitable discomfort and pain of simultaneously actualizing our potentials for the future and leaving behind our presently achieved actuality. Zarathustra says that he loves those who “will [their] own downfall,”¹⁰⁷ i.e. he loves those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for something greater than themselves. Later, Zarathustra says,

And life itself told me this secret: ‘Behold,’ it said, ‘I am that which *must overcome itself again and again* ... ‘I would rather perish than renounce this one thing; and truly where there is perishing and the falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself — for the sake of power.’¹⁰⁸

Nietzsche carries on this theme in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

All great things bring about *their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming*: thus the law of life will have it, the law of the necessity of 'self-overcoming' in the nature of life.¹⁰⁹

Here we observe the 'pruning' or 'self-pruning' mentioned in the Writings [PT 51]. For his part, Zarathustra informs us that "only if he [man] turns away from himself will he jump over his own shadow — and jump into truth, into his own sunlight."¹¹⁰ In other words, the current self must be rejected for our better or higher selves which can only be done by embracing transformational change.

Unlikely as it may seem at first, Nietzsche's statements converge strongly with the Bahá'í Writings. In the first place, there is strong convergence if not outright agreement in regards to self-overcoming as a necessary aspect of living ethically and making true progress in self-actualization and living as moral beings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

For I have supplicated and beseeched before the Threshold of the Almighty that thy wish may be realized, so thou mayest overcome the self and perform charitable deeds and that human perfections may appear from thee. [TAB3 545]

In other words, self-overcoming is needed to "to awaken spiritual susceptibilities in the hearts of mankind" [PUP 7]. The theme of 'self-overcoming' is also presented in the Writings as 'sacrifice' and 'service' since, in the Bahá'í view, these lead to the kind of self-overcoming we need to make. Speaking of the higher and lower self, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of

our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection.

Self-sacrifice means to subordinate this lower nature and its desires to the more godly and noble side of ourselves. Ultimately, in its highest sense, self-sacrifice means to give our will and our all to God to do with as He pleases. Then He purifies and glorifies our true self until it becomes a shining and wonderful reality.¹¹¹

This, too, converges with Nietzsche in significant ways. We must “give our will and our all to God” in the same way as Nietzsche expects us to obey the imperative will to power that functions as ‘God’ in his philosophy.

Self-overcoming also requires us to overcome the traditional beliefs — especially ethical beliefs — that we have passively accepted. To the extent that we do not, our self-overcoming is incomplete and, thereby, less effective and gives us less power or capacity. Nietzsche believes that we must create our own ethics and norms¹¹² — a task that he held as impossible for religious believers. However, the Bahá’í Writings find no difficulty with Nietzsche’s requirements insofar as they unequivocally reject “*ancestral imitations*” [PUP 144] and insist on our obligation to the independent investigation of truth [SWAB 248]. The independent investigation of truth in ethics does not mean we have to reject the moral guidance of the Manifestations — but rather that we must to the best of our ability consciously understand such guidance since otherwise our acts become blind imitation instead of a rational choice. Investigating and understanding a given moral law, in effect, makes that law ours even if it is a re-discovery. As Goethe says, “What you have inherited from your forefathers, it takes work to make it your own.”¹¹³ In this way, the principle of the independent investigation of truth absolves the acceptance of revealed truth from being a mere “ancestral imitation.” In other words, those who are willing to make the sacrifices of self-

overcoming will be blessed with “*the quickening of mental capacity and the increase of spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 340].

It may be objected that the Writings proclaim that humans were meant for happiness — which indeed, they are [SDC 60; cf. SDC 98] — but happiness for the Writings and Nietzsche consists in the expansion of our powers not in mere ease and comfort be it psycho-spiritual and/or physical. Athletic training illustrates this point: the training itself is inevitably uncomfortable, painful and gruelling — yet the athlete who this pain in light of his goals, is happy because s/he because s/he can feel the growth of his/her capacity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “*The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering*” [PT 178, emphasis added]. In short, the suffering required by self-overcoming is necessary for the happiness that is to come both in this world and the next. As seen in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche also recognizes the need to be willing to suffer on the way to becoming a bridge for the Superman or even a Superman himself.

9: Perspectivism and Truth

One of the most controversial and influential aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy is perspectivism according to which we can only have perspectives on things but have no true knowledge of anything.¹¹⁴

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena — “There are only facts” — I would say: No, *facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations*. We cannot establish any fact “in itself”: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.

“Everything is subjective,” you say; but even this is interpretation. *The “subject” is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is* — Finally, is it necessary to posit an

interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis ...

It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.¹¹⁵

In short, Nietzsche denies the existence of ‘facts’ or ‘truths’ and replaces them with “interpretations” or perspectives or, more colloquially, opinions. This is the view described by Steven D Hales and Rex Welshon as “*strong perspectivism [which] is what many think Nietzsche offers ... [and which] is self-refuting.*”¹¹⁶ This claim that there are no ‘facts’ is self-refuting because it cannot itself be taken as factual. We find “strong perspectivism” exemplified in the following statement by Nietzsche:

The apparent world, i.e., a world viewed according to values; ordered, selected according to values, i.e., in this *case according to the viewpoint of utility* in regard to the preservation and enhancement of the power of a certain species of animal.

The perspective therefore decides the character of the “appearance”! *As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective!* By doing that one would deduct relativity!

Every center of force adopts a perspective toward the entire remainder, i. e., its own particular valuation, mode of action, and mode of resistance. The “apparent world,” therefore, is reduced to a specific mode of action on the world, emanating from a center.¹¹⁷

In other words, all we have is appearances determined by the perspectives we adopt. There is no “noumenal” or underlying reality or ‘real’ truth existing independently of some perspectives. Moreover, Nietzsche states that all truth-claims

are relative since all are the subjective products of a particular perspective. Since all truth-claims or perspectives are relative, we cannot judge between contradictory truth-claims because there is no privileged perspective or viewpoint to function as a standard by which to judge. This leads to the startling conclusion that either there is no truth at all or even if there is a truth, it cannot be known by humankind. Nietzsche writes,

'Truth' is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth, as a processus in infinitum, an active determining – not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. *It is a word for the "will to power."*¹¹⁸

Struggles about truth are ultimately struggles about authority and power. The concept of 'truth' depends on the will to power insofar as all human activities are shaped by each person's will to power. He states,

'The "will to truth" would then have to be investigated psychologically: it is not a moral force, but a form of the will to power. This would have to be proved by showing that it employs every immoral means: metaphysicians above all.¹¹⁹

In short, there is no such thing as even attempting to seek the truth objectively.

"Strong perspectivism" has at least five major weak points. The first results from self-reference: logical self-refutation (encountered in many postmodern thinkers¹²⁰). If all truth-claims are perspectival, then this view itself is perspectival – and therefore, the opposite view that truth is absolute may well be true at least from some perspectives. But that is exactly what "strong perspectivism" denies. It says that all truth-claims are

perspectival, thereby including itself. In short, if strong perspectivism is true, then it may also be false. This is a logically untenable foundation for any attempt at a coherent philosophy because it undermines every additional argument built on this principle.

Second, since perspective determines ‘truth’ there can be no non-perspectival or extra-perspectival standpoint point from which to judge among different or competing ‘truths-claims.’ Consequently, there can be no such things as errors. In effect, all perspectives are true even though we may personally prefer some to others — but preferences do not constitute truth. Nietzsche’s view effectively says that there can be no errors since all perspectives must be accepted as equally valid. This is not only improbable but also impractical: nature is not so malleable and accommodating to our perspectives as to let us think that pencils are genuinely broken in a glass of water — or that the traffic light is green just because we think so. At some point we often discover one perspective or the other is false, i.e. that there is a real, ‘noumenal’ truth underneath our perceptions that may, in some cases, quite rudely correct our mistaken views. Furthermore, the Bahá’í the Writings plainly contradict such ego-inflating ‘infallibilist’ views and clearly acknowledge the existence of “*error*” [SAQ 149], “*idle fancies and vain imagining*” [ESW 15], “*ignorance*,” [SAQ 6], “*heedlessness and superstition*” [PB 95], and ideas that are “*absurd*” [TAF 18].¹²¹ Indeed, Bahá’u’lláh even recognizes that some religions “*are the outcome of human perversity*” [GWB 217]. The existence of error harmonizes, as we shall see below, with “weak perspectivism” i.e. the viewpoint that not all perspectives are necessarily true.

Third, there is a category mistake insofar as Nietzsche’s conflation of the will to power with the will to truth mistakes God with man. In the case of God, the two are the same: whatever God wills is the truth since God’s will determines the nature of reality and all parts of reality. “*He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth*” [GWB 290].

However, this is not the case for humans. Who has not had the experience of interpreting a shadow on a forest walk as a ferocious animal? Obviously, our interpretations do not 'make' facts or reality. Nature will quickly correct us if our perspective lets us mistake a crocodile for a convenient log.

Fourth, if perspectives or standpoints determine the truth, then, there can be no absolute truth that is true in the same way in all perspectives. This is incompatible with the Writings because if the statement 'Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God for this age' is not objectively true across all perspectives (though not necessarily recognized as true), then the universality and potency of His revelation is negated.

The problem with Nietzsche, of course, is that on this issue as on so many others, he is conflicted, making it difficult to know which view is really his. After all, there is significant evidence from his work that he is convinced that there are no absolute truths of any kind.¹²² Yet, he blatantly violates his own principle. The entire doctrine of the will to power would be negated if its existence were dependent on perspective. Moreover, there would be an easy escape from Nietzsche's philosophy by adopting a different perspective in which the will to power is not true! If truth is strongly or purely perspectival, all of Nietzsche's critiques of European culture, of Christianity (which he loves to hate) and of spirituality are moot. They have no validity for other perspectives. How can he purport to 'unmask' morality in *The Genealogy of Morals* if there is nothing to unmask from Christian morality — except a perspective whose morals are as valid as the morality that emerges from Nietzsche's own perspective? If truth is perspectival, how can Zarathustra condemn the morals of the common man — which are true in their perspective? We need not multiply examples of Nietzsche's obvious logical entanglements caused by the conflict between his overt statements that appear to accept "strong perspectivism" and his actual practice.

Clearly, the Bahá'í Writings reject “strong perspectivism.” Nowhere do they suggest that truth is entirely subjective, i.e. wholly dependent on our outlook and perspective. If this were true, there would be no point in teaching the independent investigation of truth. There could only be an exploration of our own perspectives/opinions which are often likely to be mere “vain imaginings.” Would God really cease to exist if no one’s perspective included Him? Is Bahá'u'lláh’s station as the Manifestation for this age or God’s existence really dependent on human perspective and subjective opinion? If that were the case, why would Bahá'u'lláh declare,

Their belief or disbelief in My Cause can neither profit nor harm Me. We summon them wholly for the sake of God. He, verily, can afford to dispense with all creatures. [GWB 85]

In other words, God and the Cause of God any independent of any human perspective or interpretation. Their truths are not relative.

This passage, and others like it, leave no doubt that all perspectives are not equally true or valid, and that at least on some issues, truth is not relative. In other words, our own perspectives, which may be based on the false imaginations may lead us to deny the existence of the Manifestation — but this perspective is false even if it is sincerely held. Sincerity itself is not a guarantor of truth or logical validity; sincerely held beliefs can be wrong. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh advises us to “meditate profoundly ... so that *light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns*” [KI 8]. These distinctions demonstrate there is no attempt made to salvage all possible views by attributing them to differing standpoints or perspectives and by declaring them all to be relatively true. At least some perspectives are able to provide truth while others are not.

There is a fifth problem with “strong perspectivism,” viz. it also leads to problems vis-à-vis understanding the Bahá'í Writings. For example, after explaining that the four methods of acquiring truth are flawed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “*there is no standard in the hands of people upon which we can rely*” [SAQ 298]. This sounds like “strong perspectivism.” However, if we accept this interpretation non-reflectively, i.e. without analysis, a serious problem rapidly arises: ‘Shall we understand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s declaration to mean that we cannot know with certainty even the most ‘elemental facts’ such as (1) human beings need food or they will starve to death; (2) the seasons progress in a specific and orderly manner; (3) lobsters do not grow up to be maple trees and (4) the sun appears to move from east to west across the sky? Do the Writings really mean to suggest that there is no certain human knowledge about anything at all including Napoleon’s defeat at Moscow, yesterday’s sunrise, and the law of gravity? If we take the “strong” view at face value, needless entanglements arise from one of Bahá’u’lláh’s statements:

In pursuance, however, of the principle that for every thing a time hath been fixed, and for every fruit a season hath been ordained, the latent energies of such a bounty can best be released, and the vernal glory of such a gift can only be manifested, in the Days of God. [GWB 262]

The message here would be undermined or even negated if seasonal change were disputed or even disputable. The moment we deny the certainty of our knowledge of seasonal change, the whole point Bahá’u’lláh is trying to make becomes moot. It would cause needless confusion because we would not really ‘know’ that “for every fruit a season hath been ordained.” Bahá’u’lláh knows — but could we know that *our* knowledge of the seasons is what *He* is actually referring to? The same problem would arise if Bahá’u’lláh used other examples, such as the tides or the moon’s course around the earth. It is difficult

not to conclude that the Writings are not intended to cause such difficulties.

While there is no agreement about “strong perspectivism” in the Bahá’í Writings and Nietzsche, there is far-reaching agreement in regards to “weak perspectivism” which Rex Welshon attributes to Nietzsche. He explains it as follows:

Suppose weak perspectivism is *true for every other statement except itself*. It then turns out that for the thesis of weak perspectivism, absolutism is true. Why? Because truth absolutism claims there is at least one statement that is true in all perspectives. Perhaps the only such statement is the thesis of weak perspectivism. Here, then is a way to rescue Nietzsche’s truth perspectivism without abandoning the spirit behind it ... Perhaps there are *other* statements in addition to the thesis of weak perspectivism that are true across all perspectives.¹²³

The possibility of some absolute truths, i.e. truths from all perspectives means that, in effect, some truths are not dependent on perspective, and even opens up the possibility of “extra-perspectival” truths which is how the Bahá’í Writings characterize God’s revelations. Furthermore, this also revives the possibility that there exist some objective standards by which to judge various perspectives. Finally, error is possible; not all perspectives necessarily give us the truth.

A significant agreement between “weak perspectivism” and the Bahá’í Writings emerges when he examine Shoghi Effendi’s statements about progressive revelation. He writes,

The mission of the Founder of their Faith, they conceive it to be to proclaim that *religious truth is not absolute but relative*, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, *though different in the non-essential aspects* of their

teachings, “abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and *proclaim the same Faith*.”¹²⁴

Further, he asserts that each Manifestation

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

To summarize in Hales' and Welshon's language about “weak perspectivism,” the relative truths, i.e. those which were not valid in all perspectives could be changed as historical conditions alter. Among these were the “spurious” “priest prompted superstitions” and the “non-essential” specific adaptations to geographic and cultural circumstances. They are completely dependent on perspective i.e. the standpoint of a particular culture at a particular time under particular circumstances. However, there are also “*eternal verities*” and “*God-given truths*” that are valid in all perspectives, i.e. they are absolute. Such “verities” are “restat[ed]” in every dispensation — across multiple perspectives — and while they may be expanded or given new form, the essential truths they convey remain true. In other words, the Bahá'í Writings can accept the doctrine that all statements come from a particular perspective — but in “weak perspectivism” that does not mean that some statements cannot be true across all perspectives.

“Weak perspectivism” also allows a robust commitment to the unity of truth. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms, “*No one truth can contradict another truth*” [PT 136]. He supports this by stating, that “*truth or reality is not multiple; it is not divisible*” [PUP 106]. and “*truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different*” [PT 128]. Differences in the “manifestations” of truth do not necessarily imply *logical* contradictions which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá seeks to avoid. Shoghi Effendi re-affirms this theme,

saying, “Truth may, in covering different subjects, appear to be contradictory, and *yet it is all one* if you carry the thought through to the end.”¹²⁵ He adds, “Truth is one when it is independently investigated, it does not accept division” [JWTA 35]. “Weak perspectivism” easily accommodates the Writings on this issue and so does Nietzsche if read in this way.

Our conclusion is clear: if Nietzsche’s perspectivism is understood in Hales’ and Werlshons’ sense as “weak perspectivism” and as implicitly practiced by Nietzsche, there is agreement with the Bahá’í Writings. “Weak perspectivism,” provides a more flexible outlook because it recognizes relative, perspectival truths such as seen in the cultural adaptations of the divine teachings and, it recognizes absolute cross-perspectival truths as seen in the “eternal verities” restated by the Manifestations. It also recognizes that at least some of Nietzsche’s teachings must be accepted as absolutely true, viz. self-overcoming, the will to power and the eternal return. If Nietzsche’s perspectivism is understood as “strong perspectivism,” as overtly stated by Nietzsche — though implicitly contradicted in much of what he writes — then there is no agreement between him and the Writings.

“Weak perspectivism” avoids outlandish consequences that needlessly complicate and impede the quest for knowledge and truth. After all, it is indisputable that Beethoven is physically dead; that tides come in and go out and a broken leg is really broken. What is to be gained by understanding the Bahá’í Writings in a way that opens them to such critiques as have seen above?

“Weak perspectivism” as in the following example from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is immune from the critiques that undermine “strong perspectivism.”

He has bestowed upon [man] the power of intellect so that through the attribute of reason, when fortified by the Holy Spirit, he may penetrate and discover ideal

realities *and* become informed of the mysteries *of the world of significances*. [PUP 303, emphasis added]

This statement embodies “weak perspectivism” insofar as under some circumstances — the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — reliably true knowledge about the “ideal realities” and the super-natural “world of significances” can be attained. There is no suggestion here that we need to doubt elemental facts such as difference between apples and horse shoe crabs. We should also remember that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit may impart such intellectual virtues as true independence in the investigation of truth; justice in the quest for fair and accurate presentation; humility to accept the truths we find even though they may not be what we hoped or expected; and wisdom in applying what we find in a positive way. There is no reason to limit the Holy Spirit’s inspiration to such theological virtues as faith, hope and charity. When we understand this, we can also see how and why we have true knowledge of the ‘elemental facts’ because nothing prevents the Holy Spirit from acting in our lives on a continuous basis at least vis-à-vis the basic intellectual virtues.

Elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes,

the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained. [SAQ 298]

Under the right circumstances — receiving the bounty of the Holy Spirit — we can know spiritual truths with certainty. The argument that ‘truth’ is not the same as ‘certainty’ is weak since that implies the Holy Spirit can give us certainty about untruths. That defeats the purpose of trusting in the Holy Spirit. Speaking about love, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes,

This is a proof perceptible to the senses, acceptable to reason, in accord with traditions and teachings of the Holy Books and verified by the promptings of human hearts themselves. It is a proof upon which we can absolutely rely and declare to be complete. [PUP 255]

Here, too, we observe the possibility of attaining reliable knowledge from some perspectives and, thereby, the agreement with “weak perspectivism” not just vis-à-vis elemental facts but also spiritual truths such as the existence of God, which, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can be logically proven: “*The existence of the Divine Being hath been clearly established, on the basis of logical poofs.*” [SWAB 14]

“Weak perspectivism” also allows us to accommodate such statements as “Numerous and conclusive proofs exist that go to show that this infinite world cannot end with this human life” [TAF 14]. Elsewhere, he adds,

It is my hope that from day to day your gatherings will grow and flourish, and that those who are seeking after truth will hearken therein to reasoned arguments and conclusive proofs. [SWAB 269]

And,

Day and night must you think, strive and investigate, that you may attain to the mysteries of the Kingdom; that you may attain certainty in knowledge; that you may know this world has a Creator, has a Maker, has a Resuscitator, has a Provider, has an Architect — but know this through proofs and evidences, not through susceptibilities; nay rather through decisive proofs, evident arguments and real vision — that is to say, visualizing it just as you visualize the sun. May you with complete certainty behold the signs of God and attain to the knowledge of the holy divine Manifestations. [BS 326]

Each one of these passages — and there are others to choose from — makes use of the idea of “conclusive” knowledge, or “certainty” or “proofs” and, thereby, show that the Writings are in harmony with “weak perspectivism” and the possibility of at least some statements being true across all perspectives.

10: Conclusion

In the foregoing exploration, we have shown that, despite first appearances to the contrary, there are a surprisingly large number of correlations between the Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche's philosophy. Among them we find such issues as

1. teleology;
2. perspectivism in Hale's and Welshon's sense of “weak perspectivism;”
3. the process nature of reality;
4. Aristotle's ontology of potentials,
5. the existence of a transcendent power or force manifesting in all things;
6. the importance of the transcendent aspects of existence; the religious impulse in man;
7. the unavoidable agonistic aspects of life, not by political means but by means of new ideas, revitalized values, good personal examples, energized hope, and appeals to the spiritual elements in human nature;
8. the decline of the present world order;
9. the need for revolutionary change (though not change by political revolution);
10. the rejection of partisan politics, nationalism and imperialism;
11. the universal will to power as the self-overcoming and actualization of potentials;

12. the central role of sublimation and self-overcoming;
13. the call for “a new race of men” transcending the current state of human development;
14. life as a agonistic process in various ways;
15. loyalty to the earth;
16. will as present in all things.¹²⁶

Of course, there are also areas of difference and irresolvable disagreement:

1. the master and slave morality;
2. the transvaluation of values and the slave revolt;
3. “violent aristocratic radicalism” (see Detwiler);
4. the often nasty manner of expression and demeaning tone of his writings;
5. the eternal return (unless understood in Hill’s way);
6. perspectivism, if interpreted as “strong perspectivism”;
7. atheism, if taken at face value;
8. the principle of beyond good and evil.
9. lack of an ultimate vision of a future world order;

At this point a question arises: ‘To what degree do the differences undermine the correlations between the Bahá’í Writings and Nietzsche?’ The answer depends on how we choose to read Nietzsche. If we read him in light of Kaufmann’s claim that the will to power and sublimation (which includes self-overcoming) are the “core”¹²⁷ of Nietzsche’s philosophy, then the undermining capacity of these differences is limited. As we have shown, the master-slave morality, the transvaluation of values, “the violent aristocratic radicalism,” the atheism if taken at face value and the “strong” interpretation of perspectivism and living beyond good and evil are not compatible with Kaufmann’s understanding of the “core” of

Nietzsche's philosophy. In one way or another, they conflict with the ethic of sublimation and self-overcoming in order to actualize our potentials both individually and socially. Thereby, they frustrate human development which requires us to be more than we are. If we think we are beyond good and evil; that we are aristocrats and masters with a right to rule over 'slaves'; that there is no truth to know or that can be known; that there is no progress and everything stays as it is or that the material world is all there is, then there will be little or no incentive to pursue a life of self-overcoming and sublimation of our animal natures. In all likelihood, we will find ourselves among the self-satisfied and comfortable. In our view, neither the Writings nor Nietzsche advocate such a life.

From our Kaufmannian perspective, because these points negate or at least avoid the principle of self-overcoming and sublimation, they do not really undermine the correlations we have identified. That is because the differences are based on premises incompatible with Kaufmann's view. Consequently, we must conclude that Nietzsche's work is divided by inconsistencies. This fact weakens his philosophy and encourages us to turn to the Bahá'í Writings instead.

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NOTES

- ¹ Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, in *Scholarship*, p. 17; emphasis added;
- ² Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, 21, October, 1943 in *Scholarship*, p. 4' emphasis added.
- ³ Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, 5 July, 1949, in *Scholarship*, p. 11; emphasis added.
- ⁴ The Universal House of Justice, 1998 Mar 19, *Compilation on Scholarship*.
- ⁵ *Miriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/correlate> ; also *MacMillan Dictionary*, http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/correlate_1
- ⁶ Robert C Solomon and Kathleen M Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said?*
- ⁷ *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 631.
- ⁸ Ashley Woodward, *Interpreting Nietzsche*, p. 1. See also, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 50.

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- ⁹ Paul E Kirkland, *Nietzsche's Noble Aims: Affirming Life, Contesting Modernity*, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, p. 9.
- ¹¹ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 15-16.
- ¹² Ruediger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, p. 350.
- ¹³ John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*.
- ¹⁴ Arthur C Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*.
- ¹⁵ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 10; original emphasis.
- ¹⁶ Nicholas Bunnin, Jiyuan Yu, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, p. 472.
- ¹⁷ Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/#4>
- ¹⁸ Tracy B Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation" in Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M Higgins, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, p. 131.
- ¹⁹ Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 619.
- ²⁰ *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 630.
- ²¹ Robert C Solomon, Kathleen M Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, p. 9.
- ²² Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress*
- ²³ Ian Kluge, *The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings*, in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 4, 2003 or #13 at bahai-library.com/series/Irfan . Also Ian Kluge, *Some Answered Questions: A Philosophical Perspective*, in *Lights of Irfan* 10, 2009
- ²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (Common) in "The Peasant Revolt of the Spirit," #358, p. 174; emphasis added.
- ²⁵ See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, (Kaufmann/Hollingdale) in "Towards an Outline", #2, p. 9.
- ²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1, p. 7.
- ²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #12, p. 12.
- ²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* #1, p. 7; emphasis added.
- ²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1, p. 7; emphasis added.
- ³⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1, p. 7.
- ³¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, (Hollingdale), in "Zarathustra's Prologue", #5, p. 45.
- ³² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #22, p.15,
- ³³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #23, p. 15-16.
- ³⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #23, p. 16.

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- ³⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #23, p. 16.
- ³⁶ Christa Davis Acampora, *Contesting Nietzsche*, p. 201.
- ³⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Hollingdale), III, #20, p. 227.
- ³⁸ R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 44.
- ³⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (Cowan), "We Scholars," #208.
- ⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, (Mencken), *Foreword*.
- ⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Kaufmann), I, #31.
- ⁴² Ted Sadler, "The Postmodernist Politicization of Nietzsche" in Paul Patton, *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory*, p. 225; emphasis added.
- ⁴³ Nietzsche, (Cowan) *Beyond Good and Evil*, #203.
- ⁴⁴ Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, p. 213.
- ⁴⁵ Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*.
- ⁴⁶ Nietzsche, (Cowan) *Beyond Good and Evil*, IX, #257.
- ⁴⁷ Nietzsche, (Cowan) *Beyond Good and Evil*, IX, #259; emphasis added.
- ⁴⁷ Nietzsche, (Cowan) *Beyond Good and Evil*, IX, #259.
- ⁴⁸ There is no question that passages such as this — and there are others — made it easy for Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth to portray him as a forerunner of National Socialism. From our perspective this is not the case if for no other reason than that Nietzsche despised nationalism (especially German nationalism) and socialism. (See *The Will to Power*, #125) National Socialism was too much of a mass i.e. "herd" — or Volk — movement to merit Nietzsche's approval. In *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, Mark Warren sees certain aspects of Nietzsche's beliefs as "distinctively fascist" (p. 211) but these elements cannot be taken in isolation without distorting his thought.
- ⁴⁹ Nietzsche, (Cowan) *Beyond Good and Evil*, IX, #260.
- ⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, (Hollingdale), "Of the Chairs of Virtue," p. 36.
- ⁵¹ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 183.
- ⁵² Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 184.
- ⁵³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue," #3, p. 42.
- ⁵⁴ The poet John Keats called this world "the vale of soul making" in a letter to his brother (Feb. 14, 1819). <http://www.mrbauld.com/keatsva.html> The term strikes me as appropriate to the Bahá'í teachings on the purpose of earthly life.
- ⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, (Hollingdale), V, #3, p. 43.
- ⁵⁶ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 197; cf. p. 10.
- ⁵⁷ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 197.

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- ⁵⁸ Michael Lacewing, "Nietzsche on Master and Slave Morality," <http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781138793934/A2/Nietzsche/NietzscheMasterSlave.pdf>
- ⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, (Samuel), First Essay, #7. See also, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #195.
- ⁶⁰ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 183.
- ⁶¹ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 184.
- ⁶² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book I, #26, p. 100; emphasis added.
- ⁶³ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Princeton University Press, 4th edition, 1974, p. 297.
- ⁶⁴ The Universal House of Justice, 1987 June 03, *Compilation on Vying in Service*; emphasis added.
- ⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue" #2, p. 40.
- ⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue" #2, p. 40.
- ⁶⁷ Ian Kluge, *The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings*, in *Lights of Irfan IV*, 2003, p. 17-78. See also *Bahá'í Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance*, in *Lights of Irfan VI*, 2005, p. 121-160; and *Bahá'í Ontology, Part Two: Further Explorations*, in *Lights of Irfan VII*, 2006, p. 163-200.
- ⁶⁸ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*; John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*; Robert Solomon, in "Nietzsche ad hominem: Perspectivism, Personality and Ressentiment" in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*; Sheridan Hough, *Nietzsche's Noontide Friend: The Self as Metaphoric Double*; M. Silk and J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*; Christian Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body*; Robert Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche*.
- ⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V,12, 1019a,b.
- ⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V,12, 1019a,b.
- ⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Hollingdale), Part 4, "The Honey Offering", p. 252. See the teleological subtitle of *Ecce Homo* is "How to become what one is."
- ⁷² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1067, p. 550
- ⁷³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (Zimmern) #36, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4363/pg4363.txt>
- ⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #619, p. 332-333; emphasis added
- ⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #556, p. 301-302.
- ⁷⁶ John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*, p. 4.
- ⁷⁷ R Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 105.
- ⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, (Hollingdale), #18.
- ⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1067, p. 550.

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- ⁸⁰ See Ian Kluge, "Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings: An Initial Exploration," in *Lights of Irfan* V (2004), p. 109–162.
- ⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, (Hollingdale, p. 37)
- ⁸² W.D. Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 154.
- ⁸³ Ian Kluge, Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings: An Initial Exploration, in *Lights of Irfan* 5 (2004).
- ⁸⁴ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 209.
- ⁸⁵ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 209.
- ⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, (Kaufmann), "The Birth of Tragedy" #3, p. 273.
- ⁸⁷ R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 28.
- ⁸⁸ John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*, p. 21; emphasis added.
- ⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #704, p. 374–375.
- ⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in "Zarathustra's Prologue," p. 41–42.
- ⁹¹ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 83.
- ⁹² Roy Jackson, *Nietzsche: A Complete Introduction*, p. 161.
- ⁹³ Nietzsche, (Kaufman) *The Will to Power*, #1067, p. 549.
- ⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, #125, "The Madman," p. 181.
- ⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Of the Sublime Men," p.140–141.
- ⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Of the Sublime Men," p.140–141; emphasis added.
- ⁹⁷ Nietzsche (Kaufmann) *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books," #5, p. 368; emphasis added.
- ⁹⁸ Nietzsche (Kaufmann), *The Will to Power*, #2, p. 7.
- ⁹⁹ R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 95.
- ¹⁰⁰ Karl Loewth in Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, p. 206.
- ¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, (Hollingdale) *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in "Zarathustra's Prologue" #3, p. 42.
- ¹⁰² Abir Taha, *Nietzsche's Coming God*, p. 10–11.
- ¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in "Of the Priests", p. 114–115.
- ¹⁰⁴ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, p. 194.
- ¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, (Hollingdale) #2, p. 115.
- ¹⁰⁶ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 183.
- ¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in "Zarathustra's Prologue," p. 44.
- ¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, (Hollingdale), in "Of Self-Overcoming," p. 138.
- ¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Kaufmann), III, #27, p. 161; emphasis added.

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- ¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in “*Of the Sublime Men*,” p. 141.
- ¹¹¹ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, Dec. 10, 1947, in *Compilations, Lights of Guidance*, p. 113.
- ¹¹² Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 217.
- ¹¹³ Goethe, *Faust I*, Scene I, l. 683-684.
- ¹¹⁴ Postmodern philosophy is built on the denial of truth-claims. See Kluge, “*Postmodernism and the Bahá’í Writings*” in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 9, 2008.
- ¹¹⁵ Nietzsche (Kaufmann/Hollingdale), *The Will to Power*, #481, p. 267; emphasis added.
- ¹¹⁶ Steven D Hales and Rex Welshon, *Nietzsche’s Perspectivism*, p. 18; emphasis added.
- ¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Kaufmann / Hollingdale). #567. P. 305
- ¹¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Kaufmann/Hollingdale), #442, p. 298.
- ¹¹⁹ Nietzsche (Kaufmann/Hollongdale), *The Will to Power*, #583, p. 315.
- ¹²⁰ Ian Kluge, “*Postmodernism and the Bahá’í Writings*” published in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 9, 2008. Also, Ian Kluge, “*Relativism and the Bahá’í Writings*” in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 9, 2008.
- ¹²¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejects the concept of a real infinite regress as “absurd.”
- ¹²² Steven D Hales and Rex Welshon, *Nietzsche’s Perspectivism*, p. 35.
- ¹²³ Rex Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, p. 110-111; emphasis added.
- ¹²⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Appreciations of the Bahá’í Faith*, p. 5.
- ¹²⁵ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, Feb. 24, 1947 in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 476, emphasis added.
- ¹²⁶ Bahá’u’lláh: “*the Divine Will that pervadeth all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth*” [GWB 5]. Also, “*Through His world-pervading Will He hath brought into being all created things*” [GWB 318].
- ¹²⁷ Kaufmann: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 10.

“Some Answered Questions” and Its Compiler

Baharieh Rouhani Ma‘ani

A young American living in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century had a life-changing experience. As a result, she was steered in a direction utterly different from anything she and her parents had in mind. Laura Clifford Barney was born in 1879 to Alice Pike and Albert Barney. At a very young age her parents took her to Paris, where she studied at a prestigious school for about nine years. In 1892 she returned to the United States and entered Visitation, a Catholic Convent School in Georgetown. She later returned to Paris, and studied philosophy and religion. She was a bright and serious student with an active and enquiring mind, keenly interested in discovering the frontiers of knowledge. Her mother had established a salon in Paris where artists and writers gathered. Laura “often attended her mother’s circle of friends in the French Salon” and “participated in the intellectual discussions among influential writers and artists...” Her “serious questions often led to insightful observations on the part of those present.”¹

During her stay in Paris in early 1900, Laura heard of the Bahá’í Faith and studied its tenets with May Eliss Bolles (Maxwell), the renowned Bahá’í teacher. Heeding the voice of her conscience, Laura embraced the nascent Faith and pursued a lifelong career of service to humanity, which made her world

renown. This paper is about one of her most remarkable achievements that have immortalized her name in the annals of religion. *Some Answered Questions* is the descriptive title of the book she has compiled of answers to the questions she presented to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest Son and Successor of Bahá’u’lláh and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. In a cable sent to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of France on the occasion of her passing in August 1974, the Universal House of Justice, the Supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, said: “She achieved immortal fame through compilation *Some Answered Questions* unique entire field religious history.”

Asking Questions A Potent Means to Expand the Horizon of Knowledge

Human beings have ever used the means of inquiry to unlock the doors of understanding matters initially appearing beyond their ability to comprehend. Thought-provoking questions emanating from the minds of sincere seekers expand the horizon of knowledge; enlightened answers widen the scope of understanding abstruse concepts. The most opportune time for asking questions is when God’s Mouthpiece and the authorized interpreter of the revealed Word live among humankind. Many of the Báb’s Writings have been revealed in response to petitions. The declaration of His Mission to Mullá Ḥusayn followed an exchange of questions and answers leading to the revelation of commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, in response to a question he considered to be the proof of the truth of His Mission, if it were revealed unasked, which came to pass as he had expected.

The Writings of Bahá’u’lláh revealed in response to petitions are numerous. The Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Book that “occupies a position unequalled by any work in the entire range of Bahá’í literature, except the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh’s Most Holy Book” [GPB 139], has been revealed in response to questions He

received from one of the Báb's uncles. The process of the revelation of the laws did likewise begin with enquiries received from the believers early in Bahá'u'lláh's ministry. It was during the years of exile in Adrianople (Edirne of today), almost immediately after His Declaration in Baghdad in 1863 that Bahá'u'lláh permitted all to ask whatever questions they had concerning laws and ordinances needed by humankind. The responses were initially revealed in Persian. Later in 'Akká, in response to further requests, He revealed the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.² Had the early believers not asked questions, the inexhaustible reservoir of divine knowledge, although unsealed, would probably not have been revealed in such pronounced measure.

Although the Báb had forbidden His followers "to ask questions of Him Whom God will make manifest (Bahá'u'lláh) unless their questions were submitted in writing and pertained to subjects worthy of His lofty station" [KA note 146], Bahá'u'lláh relieved them of the prohibition:

In the Bayán it had been forbidden you to ask Us questions. The Lord hath relieved you of this prohibition, that ye may be free to ask what you need to ask, but not such idle questions as those on which the men of former times were wont to dwell. Ask ye that which shall be of profit to you in the Cause of God and His dominion, for the portals of His tender compassion have been opened before all who dwell in heaven and on earth. [KA ¶126]

Bahá'u'lláh continued to encourage the believers to ask questions. In a Tablet revealed in honor of a believer titled *Vafá*, He says:

We have noted the Questions thou hast asked and will readily answer thee. It behoveth everyone in this Day to ask God that which he desireth, and thy Lord will heed his petition with wondrous and undeniable verses. [TB 183]

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's major works published in English have been revealed in response to questions. In addition to *The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)*, they include: *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, *Javáhiru'l-Asrár (The Gems of Divine Mysteries)*; *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*; *Súriy-i-Vafá (Tablet to Vafá)*; *Lawḥ-i-Siyyid-i-Mihdíy-i-Dahají (Tablet to Siyyid Mihdíy-i-Dahají)*; *Lawḥ-i-Mánikchí Šáḥib (Tablet to Mánikchí Šáḥib)*; *Responses to questions of Mánikchí Šáḥib from a Tablet to Mirzá Abu'l-Faḍl*; *Tablet of the Seven Questions*. In addition to these titles, Shoghi Effendi has included in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* some Tablets or excerpts thereof revealed in response to questions.

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets have been published as provisional translations, such as *Lawḥ-i-Kullu't-Ta'ám (Tablet of All Foods)*, *Lawḥ-i-Ṭibb (Tablet to the Physician)*, and others. These Tablets can be found in some Bahá'í journals.

Numerous other Tablets revealed in Persian and Arabic, as yet un-translated, have also been revealed in response to questions. Bahá'u'lláh particularly encouraged the friends to ask questions about the laws of the new dispensation almost immediately after His declaration in April 1863. In Adrianople (Edirne) He revealed some laws in response to a number of questions. Later in 'Akká the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was revealed, which incorporates the laws revealed in Adrianople. After the revelation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Jináb-i-Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín was authorized to submit questions concerning the laws. The treatise, titled *Questions & Answers*, an appendix to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, is a compilation he made of Bahá'u'lláh's answers to questions concerning the laws of the Most Holy Book.

The practice of responding to questions continued during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. When the light of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation moved westward and illumined North America, the new adherents' access to the vast ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's writings was confined to drops, because material translated to English was scarce, indeed. The scarcity caused them to turn to

‘Abdu’l-Bahá for answers to questions occupying their minds. One of the newly enrolled believers, a young woman of twenty-one with an active and enquiring mind was Laura Clifford Barney, who after marriage with Hippolyte Dreyfus, became known as Madam Laura Dreyfus-Barney. The answers she received to her numerous questions were of such inestimable value that with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approval, she compiled them into a book, titled *Some Answered Questions*.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the infallible Interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and His Successor, received and answered countless questions concerning various aspects of His Father’s revelation. The responses to these questions are contained in many volumes of His Writings; in Farsi they usually bear the title *Makatíb*, in English they were originally known as *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Those retranslated have been published in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. *Some Answered Questions* is a compilation devoted in its entirety to the questions presented to Him by Laura Clifford Barney and of answers He revealed in response.

The process of asking questions and being enlightened by answers from infallible sources of guidance has been ongoing since the ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause of God (1921-1957) received and answered questions from individual Bahá’ís and institutions throughout the world. Some National Assemblies have compiled and published the answers to questions from their respective communities. The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, has likewise received and answered questions ever since its inception in April 1963. Many volumes containing its messages have been published in Persian and English; many of the messages are in response to questions. A good source of reference for messages issued by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice in response to questions is *Lights of Guidance*.

A more detailed survey of Bahá'í writings in response to questions is a theme worthy of further exploration. The purpose of this brief explanation is to highlight the importance of asking intelligent questions, the answers to which expand the horizon of knowledge.

Questions & Answers and Some Answered Questions – Similarities and Differences

Among a multitude of titles containing Bahá'í Sacred Writings two are devoted entirely to authoritative answers to questions: The first is titled *Questions & Answers*, the second *Some Answered Questions*. The first is a document comprising exclusively of answers Bahá'u'lláh revealed in response to questions about the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. It is by nature of small size and regarded an appendix to the Most Holy Book. Its compiler is Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, one of the erudite, devoted and trusted followers of Bahá'u'lláh. He was a *mujtahid* (specialized in Islamic jurisprudence) before embracing the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths. Bahá'u'lláh authorized him not only to ask questions about the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, but also to compile *Risálih-i-Su'ál va Javáb* (*Questions & Answers*).

The second, *Some Answered Questions* consists entirely of answers 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to scores of questions on a variety of subjects from Laura Clifford Barney. The circumstances surrounding the compilation of *Some Answered Questions* were very different from those leading to *Questions & Answers*: Unlike *Questions & Answers*, which was compiled before the Bahá'í Faith had spread to the western hemisphere, *Some Answered Questions* took shape when the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh had reached the shores of North America and spread to parts of Europe. Many westerners, who had embraced the Bahá'í Faith made their way to the Holy Land, to attain the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. Laura Clifford Barney was one of them.

Meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shortly after she had embraced the Bahá’í Faith in Paris confirmed Laura Barney in the belief that He was the living embodiment of divine wisdom and the inexhaustible source of true knowledge, the Person to Whom she could turn for convincing answers to her unanswered questions. To gain a deeper understanding of the subjects that fascinated her mind, she wasted no time in presenting questions to Him, begging for answers. Recognizing her insatiable quest for knowledge and understanding, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá patiently nurtured her inquiring mind and responded to her questions with supreme compassion. However, His tasks were many and time for answering questions was extremely tight.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s decision to respond to Laura Barney’s questions when she was present in ‘Akká seems to have been prompted by other considerations: Laura initially had no knowledge of Persian or Arabic; she spoke English and French. It was of crucial importance to the success of the undertaking for the interpreter to understand and translate her questions accurately. The interpreter had to also convey precisely ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response. Any difficulty in understanding the question or conveying the answer could be rectified speedily when it was done in person. Another major concern was the slowness and unreliability of the postal service during those difficult times in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry, when His internal and external enemies liked nothing better than seeing Him completely annihilated. They colluded to ensure the success of their schemes, which appeared successful when He was incarcerated in the early years of the twentieth century. He was under surveillance, His communications were censored and His life threatened. It was at a time like this, so fraught with danger that Laura Barney’s quest for deeper knowledge was addressed. However, every precaution had to be taken to avoid placing in the hand of the enemy pretexts for adding to the stringent restrictions in force. In person communication proved invaluable; it avoided the pitfalls of communication by mail, at the same time it made clear that no earthly force could hamper

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s will to move the Cause of God forward. With His permission, she presented her questions to Him in person and arranged for His answers to be recorded.

One major difference between *Questions & Answers* and *Some Answered Questions* is that in the case of *Questions & Answers*, questions were submitted in writing, answers were likewise revealed in writing. *Some Answered Questions* comprises responses to questions presented in person but recorded as they were uttered. To ensure authenticity, before *Some Answered Questions* was published, the responses were reviewed and approved by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Laura Barney outlines how the process began and moved forward: “While I desired from the very beginning that the Master’s utterances be recorded in Persian, it was only when the Master mentioned that at some time these transcripts would have to be reviewed and corrected, that He made the decision that His utterances be also recorded in Persian.” She adds: “... the Master not only corrected Mírzá Munír’s first draft,³ but after the corrections were incorporated ‘Abdu’l-Bahá again reviewed the corrected version and signed each corrected subject.”⁴

Unlike *Some Answered Questions*, which was published immediately after it was approved by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the text of *Questions & Answers*, though compiled during Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry, remained unpublished until 1910. Its English translation was published together with the authorized English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in 1992. The reason for the delay in the publication of *Questions & Answers* was the necessity for Bahá’u’lláh’s Book of Laws to be translated and annotated under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice. Without the Book, the appendix would have had no source of reference.

Although Zaynu’l-Muqarrabín and Laura Clifford Barney enjoy the honor of being the compilers of *Questions & Answers* and *Some Answered Questions* respectively, some differences set them apart: Zaynu’l-Muqarrabín was a man from

Iran, the state religion of which has been Islam for centuries. He was well versed in Islamic jurisprudence. Laura Barney did not belong to a religious class. She was an emancipated young woman raised in the cradle of liberation. As stated earlier, Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín was authorized to present questions in writing to Bahá'u'lláh exclusively about the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Laura Barney enjoyed the opportunity to present questions to 'Abdu'l-Bahá on subjects of her choice. She also enjoyed the permission to arrange for the publication and dissemination of *Some Answered Questions* in two languages almost immediately after it was compiled, while *Questions & Answers* took more than two decades to be published in Persian and much longer to be published in English and other languages. Unlike Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, Laura Barney had no familiarity with Persian and/or Arabic when she set foot on the path of search, yet her "imperishable service", as Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause of God, says,

was to collect and transmit to posterity in the form of "Some Answered Questions," 'Abdu'l-Bahá's priceless explanations, covering a wide variety of subjects, given to her in the course of an extended pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and undertook the complex task of compiling the book. [GPB 260]

The Compiler of Some Answered Questions

From among the early western believers Laura Clifford Barney was most qualified to undertake the compilation of *Some Answered Questions*. Not only did she have scholastic qualifications and intellectual maturity for undertaking the task, but also possessed the inherent qualities needed to successfully accomplish the goal. Additionally, she had the means to have the compilation published in a befitting manner in Persian and English, and disseminated internationally. To accomplish her objective, she made repeated visits to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and persevered until the daunting task was complete.

Learning was her lifelong objective. When a question occupied her mind she enthusiastically pursued the path of search until she found the answer. She was both meticulous and methodic in her work. Above all she was a dedicated believer and utterly devoted to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, she had complete faith in Him as the Centre of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. When she was unsure about the accuracy of a piece of information, she sought clarification. Before publishing the book, she did her utmost to ensure that every detail was checked carefully and highest standards were observed.

The process of asking questions probably started with Laura Barney submitting them in writing. Soon it became clear that the scope of her endeavor and the complexities involved made it most difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the work through correspondence. Also, with the heavy responsibilities ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shouldered and the little time He had available to achieve so much, expounding on Laura Barney’s complex questions could be achieved efficiently and with speed if she were present in ‘Akká. Therefore, she received permission to present her questions in person. Being in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá while He responded to her questions proved of crucial importance, because it provided her with the opportunity to pay careful attention to the answers as they were uttered, and could seek clarification if the interpreters did not convey the response clearly, or if she had difficulty understanding the concept.

To reach the Holy Land, which was part of the Ottoman Empire at the time, the western pilgrims travelled to France, whence to Egypt and the Holy Land, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his family continued to live as exiles after Bahá’u’lláh ascended to the Celestial Realm. The pilgrims waited in Egypt until called by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Since restrictions were in place, only a few could visit Him at a time. As a result, the pilgrims were afforded the opportunity to get to know the Bahá’ís residing in Egypt, the most prominent of whom was Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl. The

opportunity was priceless: The pilgrims not only recovered from the rigors of travel but also used the time to prepare themselves spiritually for the realization of their long-awaited dream; their visit to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant. Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl was available to answer their questions and help them prepare for the sanctity of the experience they were about to witness. The person who made the most of her stay in Egypt and gathered many a priceless gem from Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s treasury of knowledge was Laura Barney. Encouraged by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, she never failed to consult him when she needed sound advice. Seeing her vast capacity for acquiring knowledge, Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl unhesitatingly tutored and deepened her understanding of Bahá’í history and teachings. He was her beloved teacher, the person she appreciated for his rare qualities of knowledge, wisdom, humility and generosity of heart and mind. To show her appreciation for his assistance, while he was alive,⁵ she never failed to help him in spreading the light of the knowledge of the Faith among humankind. She financed the publication of some of his writings in English. She also paid for his trip to and sojourn in Paris for about three and a half months, she likewise financed his trip to and stay in the United States lasting over three years.

Never before in a religious dispensation had a woman the opportunity to submit a wide range of questions to an infallible Centre of Authority and receive His detailed and authoritative answers. In addition to the questions Laura Barney asked in person, she submitted questions in the missives she sent to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. A few Tablets revealed in her honor, which have been published, confirm this. One case in point is the Tablet revealed in response to her question about the institution of Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, another is about the wisdom of burying the dead.

Laura Barney gave careful consideration to the nature of questions she asked, also to the organization of the material she compiled. According to Stockman, “The book explored eighty-

four questions covering such subjects as “The Resurrection of Christ’, ‘The Holy Spirit’, ‘The trinity’, ‘Predestination’, ‘Modification of Species’, ‘The Progress of Man in the Other World’, ‘Healing by Spiritual Means’, ‘The Influence of the Stars’ and ‘Strikes’. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was also asked to comment on specific verses in Revelation and Isaiah and to describe the missions of Abraham, Moses and Jesus.”⁶ In her preface to the book, Laura Barney explains how the book came about:

During my several visits to ‘Akká, these answers were written down in Persian while ‘Abdul-Bahá spoke, not with a view to publication, but simply that I might have them for future study ... In these lessons He is the teacher adapting Himself to His pupil, and not the orator or poet.

This book presents only certain aspects of the Bahá’í Faith, which is universal in its message and has for each questioner the answer suited to his special development and needs.

In my case the teachings were made simple, to correspond to my rudimentary knowledge, and are therefore in no way complete and exhaustive ... [SAQ 2014, xix]

Describing the organization of the contents of *Some Answered Questions*, Laura Barney says: “Originally they were not given in any special order, but have now been roughly classified for the convenience of the reader.” She confirms the addition of a Table of Contents “merely to indicate the subjects treated of”, adds that the Persian text has been closely followed and that “many of the Persian and Arabic names have been written in their simplest form without strictly adhering to a scientific system which would be confusing to the average reader” [SAQ xx].

Living in Paris, a city far closer to the Holy Land geographically than any part of the United States, was a great advantage. It afforded Laura Barney repeated trips to and from

Egypt with relative ease and speed. She then traversed the distance between Port Sa'id and Holy Land in a relatively short time. The means of transport were in those days by sea. Her flexibility made it possible for her to go at short notice and stay for as long as it was possible and prudent. She was ecstatic and truly grateful for whatever time she was allowed to spend close to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family. When she was not busy formulating questions, presenting them, listening and recording the answers, organizing her work and studying the Faith with the holy family, she was able to learn Persian, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged her to do.

Learning Persian proved helpful in enhancing Laura Barney's understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's utterances. She also taught English and French to the daughters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, particularly Rúhâ Khánum and Munavar Khánum, the youngest two.

Laura Barney's visits were of varying duration, at times extended to many months. Between 1900 and 1908 she visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá several times. According to H.M. Balyuzi, it was during her "repeated and extended visits to the Holy Land ... during those months, stretched over several years, that a book unique in the entire range of the Writings of the Founders of the Faith took shape. The book was *Some Answered Questions*. Questions came from Laura Barney and 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered them."⁷ Laura Barney presented her questions when 'Abdu'l-Bahá had time to spare, invariably at mealtime. His response was translated on the spot by a resident Bahá'í proficient in both English and Persian.

To record the answers in English, initially Laura Barney made notes. Later she was allowed to bring with her a stenographer. On her visit to 'Akká in 1904 she was accompanied by Ms. Ethel Rosenberg, an English Bahá'í, who recorded on the spot 'Abdu'l-Bahá's translated explanations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answers were also recorded in Persian for the benefit of the members of the family who were not present at the table.⁸ Afrukhtih, one of

the interpreters, explains that Mírzá Munír, the son of Mírzá Muḥammad-Qulí, the faithful half-brother of Bahá'u'lláh, was assigned the task.⁹ The *Foreword* to the latest revised edition of *Some Answered Questions* prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre states:

Arrangements were made for one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sons-in-law, or for one of His three secretaries of that time, to take down in Persian the text of His replies. From the resulting collection of notes a selection was made; 'Abdu'l-Bahá then corrected these notes twice in His own hand, sometimes substantially revising them in the process as well as carefully reviewing the final wording. [SAQ 2014, xii]

Laure Barney herself prepared the English translation of *Some Answered Questions* on the basis of the approved Persian text. The descriptive title was carefully selected and approved by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In the preface to the first English edition, published in 1908 she explains the conditions under which 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded to her questions:

"I HAVE GIVEN TO you my tired moments," were the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as He rose from table after answering one of my questions.

As it was on this day, so it continued; between the hours of work, His fatigue would find relief in renewed activity; occasionally He was able to speak at length; but often, even though subject might require more time, He would be called away after a few moments; again, days and even weeks would pass, in which He had no opportunity of instructing me. But I could well be patient, for I had always before me the greater lesson — the lesson of His personal life. [SAQ xix]

The 1904 visit of Laura Barney and Ethel Rosenberg coincided with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's re-incarceration. The strict

conditions imposed on Bahá'u'lláh and His family after their arrival in 'Akká in 1868 had eased over the years affording them some freedom of movement. The relaxation of the stringent restrictions had made it possible for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to meet with western pilgrims in small groups and to initiate the construction of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel. After Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's half-brother, unhappy with the provisions of his Father's Book of the Covenant, which bestowed upon him a station beneath that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, started a campaign to discredit Him. Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí's constant agitation and baseless accusations against 'Abdu'l-Bahá resulted in the dispatch of a commission of enquiry by the central government, which resulted in the re-imposition of restrictions on Him. One of the affected areas was the number of visitors He could receive, not more than a few at a time. That Laura Barney and Ms. Rosenberg visited Him at that time was in itself an extraordinary event. The purpose of the visit was for Laura to present her questions to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in person and for Ms. Rosenberg to have His translated responses recorded in English. During their prolonged stay, they lived in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's House,¹⁰ and enjoyed the incomparable blessing that living with the members of His family, particularly the Greatest Holy Leaf, afforded them. The visit extended over many months.

Living in the rarefied atmosphere of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's House accentuated the spiritual susceptibilities of the person who had come with a mind surging with questions. In His presence, her power of absorption and reflection were most intense. Deprived of these blessings, it would have been most difficult for Laura Barney to accomplish what she did. During her 1904 visit, she was inspired to make available to others, who did not have the priceless opportunity of hearing from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lips answers to the questions she was privileged to put before Him. It was at that time that arrangements were made for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's responses in Persian to be recorded for the benefit of those who could not be there in person. This text

was later corrected and signed by Him, as stated earlier in this account.

Laura's knowledge of history and scripture, also her familiarity with topics of interest to intellectuals of the time made her an ideal person to formulate questions for presentation to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Her organizational ability and meticulous pursuance of tasks at hand were assets she employed with great success. Never did she lose sight of what she wanted to ask, ever was she ready for the opportunity to present her questions and imbibe His answers. Fully aware of the unique honor 'Abdu'l-Bahá had graciously bestowed on her and of the preciousness of the moments He spared to answer her questions made Laura Barney all the more attentive and committed to her work. In the process she also learned the value of patience, not one of her intrinsic characteristics. In addition to the many questions her active mind formulated, a few probably came from other believers who submitted their questions through her.

Laura Barney loved life near 'Abdu'l-Bahá and preferred a place like 'Akká, a penal colony with its harsh environment to a life of luxury and comfort, to which she was used. During her visits, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded with loving kindness to the questions she presented to Him at the dining table, the only time He could spare to respond to her questions. At the table, in addition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the interpreter, Laura Barney and Ms. Rosenberg, were usually seated several pilgrims and resident believers. In consideration of traditional Middle-Eastern practices, female members of the holy family did not eat with the men if they were not close relatives. Therefore, one of the resident Bahá'ís versed in English, often Youness Khán Afroukhteh, served as interpreter. But when the family gathered at breakfast and only female western pilgrims were present, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's youngest daughters, Rouha Khánum and Munavar Khánum served as interpreters. It seems that they helped also with interpretation at the table when male pilgrims and resident Bahá'ís were not present.

Afroukhteh says the members of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s family “realized that if Miss Barney had not immersed herself in the depths of this divine Ocean, those precious gems would have remained undiscovered forever; those heavenly jewels would have been left concealed in the depths of the storehouse of meanings. And now that these hidden gems had come to light, what could be better than to record them in the Persian language so that they might remain intact and inviolate for posterity in the annals of the Faith. So they asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to assign an amanuensis to attend the meetings and take down in Persian each and every gem-like word.” He adds that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá approved the request and “Mírzá Munír, son of the departed Mírzá Muḥammad-Qulí was assigned the task...”¹¹ Afroukhteh says later in his book: “I was not aware that Miss Barney had desired a Persian compilation of the book from the outset.”¹²

When in ‘Akká, Laura Barney lived in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s House and spent considerable time associating with the ladies of the Holy Family and deepening her understanding of the verities of the Faith. Afroukhteh says: “During her one year stay, she not only became familiar with the fundamental principles and mysteries of the Cause of God but also emerged as a source for the diffusion of these divine blessings among the people.”¹³

Laura Barney’s recognition of the One Whose innate knowledge provided infallible answers to whatever puzzled her mind was key to her success in seeing to completion the task she had undertaken. Many were the pilgrims who attained ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s presence. Some asked questions, many did not. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was most generous in giving of His time to meet them and respond to their entreaties. Even non-Bahá’ís who sought His presence were not turned away; they were accommodated with utmost kindness. Myron Phelps is an example. But none achieved what Laura Barney accomplished. She sought and received permission to ask numerous questions, hear the answers and arrange for them to be recorded. “As a result of Laura Barney’s probings, answers to many questions of eternal

significance, as well as those reflecting a Western or Christian orientation, became a part of the Bahá'í sacred writings. The book has always been one of the most popular Bahá'í texts."¹⁴ Speaking of the manner the book came to be, Stockman says:

... Laura Barney, a Persian-speaking American Bahá'í, frequently visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká and asked Him questions about the Faith, often over the dinner table — much to the exasperation of the Persians present, who were not used to anyone, let alone a woman, closely questioning 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Barney took extensive notes which were informally circulated. Eventually 'Abdu'l-Bahá read, modified and approved her notes of His replies and gave her permission to publish them. Because He had approved the exact wording in the original Persian, the book became a part of Bahá'í scripture.¹⁵

Were one to enumerate outstanding attributes in a person singled out to be the recipient of the bounty bestowed on Laura Barney, top on the list would be: Utter dedication to the Centre of the Covenant, an inquisitive mind, sound knowledge of scripture and history, familiarity with issues current in early twentieth century, perseverance, meticulousness, keen interest, mature understanding, flexibility, patience and gratitude. Laura appreciated the value of the honor vouchsafed to her and did her utmost to accomplish the task to the best of her ability. Nonetheless, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's gracious approval of her undertaking to turn the outcome of her incessant probing, at a time when He was beset by incalculable difficulties, into a book for future generations to benefit from is the single most important element in eternalizing her name in the annals of the Bahá'í Faith. Concerning the circumstances surrounding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life when He answered Laura Barney's questions, Balyuzi says:

Weighed down with the oppression of the times; facing hostile officials resolved to destroy Him — officials

dispatched under the guise of a ‘Commission of Enquiry’ from the seat of Ottoman autocracy, ‘the Enquiry’ set afoot by the treachery of His own kith and kin; balked momentarily in the greatest enterprise He had undertaken – raising the mausoleum of the Báb on Mount Carmel; every minute of the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was filled with sorrow demanding vigilant action and unflinching fortitude. Such were the moments that He gave to Laura Clifford Barney as she sought knowledge and understanding.¹⁶

Laura Barney initially had no intention of publishing the text of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s answers to her questions. However, realizing the value of the answers to others, she sought His permission to publish the material:

... these answers were written down in Persian while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke, not with a view to publication, but simply that I might have them for future study But I believe that what has been so valuable to me may be of use to others, since all men, notwithstanding their differences, are united in their search for reality; and I have therefore asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s permission to publish these talks. [SAQ xix]

When permission was granted, Laura Barney carefully checked the contents against the original words spoken by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “The Persian text has been closely followed, at times even to the detriment of the English, a few alterations being made in the translation merely where the literal rendering seemed too involved and obscure ...” [SAQ xx]

To make the collected material accessible to all, Laura Barney herself arranged for its publication in English. The choice of a befitting and descriptive title for the book was important. Laura Barney received ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approval for it to be called *Some Answered Questions*. The original Persian was titled *Al-Núru’l-Abhá fi Mufaviḍāti-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. While

arrangements were being made for the publication of the book in Persian and English, Hippolyte Dreyfus, a distinguished French lawyer, who had become a Bahá'í in Paris in early 1901 and later married Laura Barney, translated it to French. The French translation under the title *Les Leçons de Saint Jean-d'Acre* was published about the time the English translation and Persian original were published.

Laura Barney was an active promoter of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, especially among the elite class in whose circle she moved and with whom she had close contact. She travelled widely to spread the teachings of the Blessed Beauty, particularly the principles of the oneness of humankind and international peace. Her international travels began with a trip to Russian Turkistan, the Turkmenistan of today, and Iran in the summer of 1906. She was on that trip accompanied by Marianne Jerard and Hippolyte Dreyfus. While in Iran, she witnessed the disturbances associated with the constitutional revolution, which had reached its climax that summer. After marriage with Hippolyte Dreyfus in April 1911, together they made a trip to the Far East in 1914. It coincided with World War I, forcing them to cut short their trip and return to France, where Hippolyte served in the army and Laura rendered invaluable service to the wounded soldiers. The War made her all the more conscious of the pivotal need of international peace. According to Dr. Giachery,

At the end of that global conflict she placed her faith in the League of Nations and represented the International Council of Women in that body, playing an important role in cultural exchange. She was the only woman named by the League Council to sit on the Sub-Committee of experts on Education, a post which she held for many years, beginning in 1926. On 23 July 1925 she was appointed Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur. In that same year she formed under the aegis of the League of Nations the 'Liaison Committee of Major

International Organizations to promote through Education better Understanding between Peoples and Classes' and became a permanent member of the committee as well as its liaison officer. In 1934 she became a member of the Advisory Committee of the League of Nations on Teaching; she was also a member of the French Committee on Intellectual Co-operation.¹⁷

Laura and Hippolyte made another trip to the Far East and Southeast Asia in 1921. It lasted several months and culminated in the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's redeeming message to places never reached before. They were in Burma when the news of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension reached them. They were among the individual believers Shoghi Effendi invited to gather in Haifa for consultation.¹⁸

Laura Barney carried out successfully the assignments 'Abdu'l-Bahá entrusted to her. One can imagine there were many. She travelled extensively and lectured eloquently "on the impelling necessity of a united world. She was a true pioneer in this field of activity at a time when the world was still geographically and politically divided and quite insensible to the call of spiritual unity. Her enthusiasm for this ideal never lessened", says Dr. Giachery.¹⁹ Her devoted services won her the unique title of Amatu'l-Bahá (Handmaid of Bahá). She is the only western female believer so designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.²⁰ Vast and illuminating as her Bahá'í services, international travels, undertakings and generous contributions to various projects have been, what has made her a unique personality among the Bahá'ís of renown is her probing mind, a crucial element in the successful completion of *Some Answered Questions*.

Laura Barney made many trips to 'Akká before *Some Answered Questions* was published. In her letter to Youness Khán, she provides first-hand information about her trips to the Holy Land during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry and about the manner *Some Answered Questions* was compiled and published.

In it she clarifies that “[t]he English and French editions were translated directly from the final Persian text corrected by the Master himself.” She also indicates that “the Master not only corrected the first draft made at a certain period by Mírzá Monir (Munír), but afterwards it was copied out and re-read by Abdu’l Bahá who corrected and signed each one of these Talks.” She also says:

... it was on my third visit to Akká that I arrived with Miss Rosenberg. I spent the winter of 1904 there. I visited Egypt briefly and in the spring of 1905 paid a visit to my mother, after which we both returned to the Holy Land. I left again in the midsummer of 1905, returning to ‘Akká in the fall of that year. I spent a part of the winter in Cairo and returned to ‘Akká and Haifa by the end of spring. After that summer, I journeyed to Iran and then came back to Europe, and in the fall returned to ‘Akká. On my return, *Some Answered Questions* had been corrected and permission had been granted for its publication.

The following year, the Persian version as well as the English and French versions of the book were published and distributed. In the second edition of the book two additional subjects were added.²¹

Laura Barney supervised the preparation of the text in English and Persian. She personally selected publishers for both editions, which came out in 1908. The French translation of the book was also published the same year.

The publication of *Some Answered Questions* coincided with the year the Young Turks revolution forced the Ottoman authorities to free political prisoners. As a result, the strict restrictions on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life were lifted. Laura Barney returned to Haifa in 1908. This visit was different from her previous trips to the Holy Land. Not only did she celebrate the

accomplishment of the formidable task, but also the freedom that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had been denied for so long.

Dissemination of *Some Answered Questions*

In the early years of the twentieth century when *Some Answered Questions* was published, marketing techniques were as yet undeveloped compared with what they are today. To disseminate the book widely, Laura Barney had copies mailed to major newspapers and to places where the light of the Faith had spread. This step was crucial if the book was to help the teaching work. The popularity of the book can be measured by the number of times it has been republished. After its publication in 1908, a US edition was published in 1918, republished in 1930, 1954, 1964 and 1981. The first pocketsize edition was published in 1984, reprinted in 2011. The book has undergone revisions authorized by the Universal House of Justice. The last revision was by a Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre in 2014.

The publication of *Some Answered Questions* in Persian and two popular languages of the time, as well as its wide dissemination among the believers, notabilities familiar with the Faith, and through important newspapers in America, England, France and India was the first large scale publicity of its kind that the Bahá’í Faith enjoyed early in its history. The book informed a significant segment of the world’s population of the views of the Centre of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the authorized interpreter of His writings on subjects that occupied their minds. It also enlightened and enthused the Bahá’ís at a time when available Bahá’í writings in English and French were scarce, providing those unfamiliar with the Faith with authentic information on a variety of topics.

A prominent Persian figure, to whom Laura had sent a copy of *Some Answered Questions* was Muḥammad-Valí Khán, Sipahdar-i-A‘zam. When Muḥammad-‘Alí Sháh was deposed and his eldest son Sultan Aḥmad Mírzá installed on the Iranian

throne, Sipahdar-i-A‘zam “became the first prime minister of the restored constitutional regime.”²² He was forced to resign in 1911, when the abortive attempt of Muḥammad-‘Alí Sháh to win back the throne took place. According to Balyuzi,

[H]e was in Paris in March, at the time when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was still visiting the French capital. Either then, or possibly sometime earlier, Mme Laura Dreyfus-Barney had presented to him a copy of the Persian version of *Some Answered Questions* by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. One day Sipahdar-i-A‘zam opened the book to read the story of Badí‘, and as he read he recalled an incident of his early youth, and wrote his recollections in the margin.²³

The notes written in Persian describe how Badí‘ delivered the Tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh to Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh and how brutally he was put to death in the summer resort of Lar in Mazandaran, where the Sháh was on a hunting expedition. The Sipahdar explains how he heard the account and gives the name of the man in charge of torturing Badí‘, to force him disclose information about the Bahá’is he knew in Tihiran. When nothing worked, including the use of bastinado and beating, even branding, his head was smashed with a pounder. The Sipahdar’s note of 2 March 1913 in the margin of page 39 of the Persian version of *Some Answered Questions* reads:

Tonight I could not sleep. Mme Dreyfus had sent me this book and I had not yet read it. It is early morning. I opened the book and read on till I reached the theme of Letters to the Kings, and to Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh. Because I had been there on that journey and had heard this account personally from Kázim Khán-i-Farrásh-Báshí, I wrote it down.

A year and a half later, on the journey to Karbila, this Kázim Khán went mad. The Sháh had him chained and he died miserably. The year I went to Tabriz, as the Governor-General of Adharbayjan, I found a grandson

of his, begging. ‘Take heed, O people of insight and understanding.’”²⁴

In a Tablet revealed in honor of Laura Dreyfus-Barney over a decade after *Some Answered Questions* had been first published, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that He always awaited receiving her joyous news indicating that she was holding in her hand *Some Answered Questions* and using its proofs and arguments to stir and enthuse the friends and handmaids of the Merciful and generating fervor among them, for she had been singled out for the honor, He said.²⁵

Laura Barney continued to ask questions after the publication of *Some Answered Questions*. Some of her questions were in writing, in response to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed Tablets. One case in point is her question about strikes, the response to which was included in the second edition of *Some Answered Questions*. Another is her question about the institution of Mashriqu’l-Adhkár.

The Fate of the Persian Original of *Some Answered Questions*

Fully cognizant of the inestimable value of the Persian original of *Some Answered Questions*, corrected and signed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Laura made a conscious decision to send it to Shoghi Effendi. In her letter of Aug. 7th, 1937 to Youness Khán Afroukhteh, she conveys this crucial piece of information: “Last winter I had Mrs. Angiz Khánúm Tabrizi deliver to Shoghi Effendi the final draft of the book as corrected and signed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”²⁶ She had in her possession a treasure trove of precious items. She had been in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during the difficult early years of the twentieth century, had compiled *Some Answered Questions* during those perilous years and kept with her the documentation. She had other papers of historical value. About three years before World War II broke out, she felt moved to send the items to

Shoghi Effendi rather than keeping them in Paris. As a result of her timely action before the onset of World War II, the precious documents and the items she sent to the Bahá'í World Centre were spared, but her other papers and belongings were confiscated, probably destroyed during the Nazi occupation of Paris.

Selected Tributes to *Some Answered Questions* and Its Compiler

Among the many tributes to the compiler of *Some Answered Questions*, one stands out as a powerful testimony to Laura Barney's sound understanding of the responses she received to her questions. Afroukhteh says: "One day as He rose from the table, while expressing a bit of weariness, He happily remarked, 'It is encouraging that after all this labour, at least she understands the concepts. This is refreshing. What would I have done if after all this effort she still failed to comprehend the issues?'"²⁷

Praising the book and its compiler, Horace Holley says: "In *Some Answered Questions*, Laura Barney accurately recorded 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answers to questions related to the Prophets, to man's destiny, his attributes and powers, to immortality and the life hereafter, which have long been cherished as an ideal introduction to this new age of universal religion." [SDC viii]

H. M. Balyuzi describes the book in more detail and praises its compiler:

... in this book, *Some Answered Questions*, the supreme genius of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is overwhelmingly manifest. Men who have devoted precious years of their lives to study and research — to the building of arguments, the laying of premise, and the marshalling of facts — have never presented the fundamentals of life and belief, the basic truths of the universe around them, and the mainsprings of action, with such lucidity and coherence as are here

apparent. Nor can they hope to rival, much less to match ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s all-encompassing wisdom. And these were words spoken without previous intimation of the nature and purport of the query. Not only do His answers arrest attention and compel thought, the strength wedded to the crystal clarity of the language enchants the mind. His statements are unencumbered, His similes most apt. His reasoning is flawless. His conclusions are unhedged and emphatic, informed with authority. *Some Answered Questions* has no equal, and the service rendered by its compiler has been characterized by the Guardian of the Faith as ‘imperishable.’²⁸

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NOTES

- ¹ *Alice Pike Barney, Her Life and Art*, p. 133
- ² *Amr va Khalq*, vol. 1, p. 10, also vol. 3, p. 352.
- ³ Mírzá Munír, the son of Mírzá Muḥammad-Qulí, Bahá'u'lláh's faithful half-brother, was assigned the task of recording 'Abdu'l-Bahá's utterances.
- ⁴ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, pp. 342-343
- ⁵ Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl passed away in 1914, when the Dreyfus-Barneys were in the Far East.
- ⁶ *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2, p. 238
- ⁷ *'Abdu'l-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 82
- ⁸ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, pp. 318-319
- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family then lived in the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá in 'Akká.
- ¹¹ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, pp. 318-319
- ¹² *Ibid*, p 344
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p 315
- ¹⁴ *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2, p. 238
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Abdu'l-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 82-83
- ¹⁷ *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. XV, p. 537
- ¹⁸ *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 55
- ¹⁹ *The Bahá'í World*, vol XV, p. 535
- ²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá bestowed the same title on 'Alaviyih Khánum, the widow of the martyred 'Aliján Máhfurúzakí. She was a fearless woman, very successful in teaching the Cause of God in Mazandaran, Iran.
- ²¹ From Laura Dreyfus-Barney's letter of Aug. 7th, 1937 to Dr. Youness Khán (*Memories*, p. 343-344)
- ²² *Bahá'u'lláh, the King of Glory*, p. 303
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 307-309
- ²⁵ Gist of part of a Tablet revealed in Laura Barney's honor, *Makatíb-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*, volume 3, p. 316
- ²⁶ Laura Dreyfus-Barney's letter to Youness Khán dated 7 August 1937.
- ²⁷ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, p. 316
- ²⁸ *'Abdu'l-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 83

A Comparison between the Commentary and Interpretation of an Islamic Tradition by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Ayatu'llah Khomeini

Moojan Momen

Abstract

This article concerns the two very different interpretations of a single Islamic Tradition as given, on the one hand, by the Islamic Shi'i clerics exemplified by Ayatu'llah Khomeini and, on the other hand by the 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the successor of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

The Marja' al-Taqlid in Shi'i Jurisprudence

The Shi'i Islam practiced by the majority of Shi'is in the world today is that of the Usuli school of Twelver (Ithna-'Ashari) Shi'ism. According to this school, all believers are divided into two groups. Those who have gone through a lengthy course at a religious college (*madrasah*), have striven to acquire the required learning, and have proven to the satisfaction of an established *mujtahid* that they have the reasoning power and knowledge needed to make their own

sound independent judgments on points of religious law (the Shari'ah) are called *mujtahids* (literally, those who have strived). Everyone who has not achieved this status and does not have a certificate from an established *mujtahid* is called a *muqallid* (literally those who follow the pattern or example set by another); they are obliged to seek out a *mujtahid* and ask that person regarding all points of the *Shari'ah*. This *mujtahid* then becomes that *muqallid's marj'a at-taqlid* (reference point to be followed [in all matters of religious law]). This means that they are the person to whom the *muqallid* turns for judgments on such matters as religious obligations (prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, etc.), business and social transactions and personal law (marriage, death, inheritance, etc.). Indeed over the last 200 years, there are few areas of individual and social life that the Shi'i *mujtahids* have not felt that they should enter. With Khomeini's coming to power in 1979, even the field of political power and national governance came under their orbit. At any one time, the general consensus among the Shi'i religious leadership raises a number of individuals to the rank of *marj'a at-taqlid* and the rest of the Shi'i world is expected to choose one of them and to follow that person. Such persons are now called Ayatu'llah al-'Uzma (often translated as Grand Ayatollah).

The word *taqlid* and *muqallid* both derive from the second form of the root Q-L-D. According to *Lane's Lexicon*, this form of the word means, in the first place, the hanging or attiring of ornaments or signs upon the neck of an animal or a person. From that it came to mean the investing or conferment of an office upon someone. In religious matters, it came to mean "investing with authority in matters of religion." Thus the verbal noun from this form of the verb, *taqlid* came to mean "a man's following another in that which he says or does, firmly believing him to be right therein, without regard or consideration of the proof, or evidence."¹

Since it is necessary for a devout believer to turn to a *marja' al-taqlid* for advice and guidance even in the ordinary actions of

everyday life, it has become the practice among *mujtahids* who want to become a *marja' al-taqlid* to write manuals covering most common aspects of everyday life (*risálih-ye 'amaliyyih*).

Ever since the founding of the Usuli school by 'Allamah al-Hilli and even before that, this question of following (*taqlid*) of a *mujtahid* has always been somewhat tricky for the Shi'i religious class. This is because there are several verses in the Qur'an which forbid following the rulings of others in matters of religion (Qur'an 33:67-8; 2:170, 5:104-5; 17:36; 21:52-4; 43:22-4). In deriving its teaching on the matter of *mujtahids* and *muqallids*, the clerics of the Usuli school have interpreted this prohibition on following another person to refer only to the fundamental tenets or doctrines of religion (*uṣūl al-dín*). And so belief in these fundamental doctrines must be the result of each individual's own independent investigation and must not be the result of merely following one's parents or religious leaders. With regard to the practices of the religion (*furú' al-dín*, subsidiary elements of the religion), the position of the Usuli school of Twelver Shi'ism is that anyone who is not qualified to be a *mujtahid* must follow the rulings of a *mujtahid*.

In arriving at this position that anyone who is not qualified to be a *mujtahid* must follow the rulings of a *mujtahid*, Shi'i scholars have used both reason and the Traditions of the Imams. There is one *ḥadīth* (Tradition) in particular that the Shi'i clerics have pointed to in putting forward evidence for their position that anyone who is not qualified to be a *mujtahid* must follow the rulings of a *mujtahid*. In the following, this *ḥadīth* is examined in some detail.

The *Hadīth* concerning *Taqlid* recorded by the Eleventh Imam from the Sixth Imam

This important *ḥadīth* is recorded and commented upon by almost every important Usuli Shi'i scholar of the last six hundred years that has written about *ijtihād* and the concept that the *mujtahids* are collectively are the general vicegerent (*al-*

ná'ib al-'amm) of the Hidden Imam and that all other Shi'is must practice *taqlíd* of one of them.

This *ḥadīth* is cited in a controversial work, the commentary attributed to the eleventh Imam Hasan al-'Askari. Shi'i scholars have been divided in their opinions as to whether this book is genuine or a forgery. Among those prominent scholars who have considered the work to be genuine are: Ibn Sháhrashub, Muḥaqqiq Karaki, al-Sháhid al-Thani, Fayd-i Kashani, Muḥammad Baqir Majlisi, Vahid Bihbihani, Shaykh Murtada Ansari and Ayatu'llah Burujirdi. Among those who have doubted the authenticity of this book are: 'Allamah al-Hilli and Ayatu'llah Khu'i.

Apart from this commentary attributed to the eleventh Imam, probably the earliest and most authoritative citing of the *ḥadīth* that we are considering here is in *al-Ihtijáj* of Ahmad ibn 'Alí ibn Abí Ṭálib al-Ṭabarsí (or Tabrisi, of the late fifth/early sixth Islamic century, late eleventh/early twelfth Gregorian century). This may be the same individual who is buried in the shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsí made famous by the siege of the Bábís there in 1848-1849.² It appears that the correct pronunciation is Tabrisi, which is derived from Tabris, the Arabic form of Tafrish, a small town south-west of Tehran. The Tradition is from the Eleventh Imam Hasan al-'Askari and he is commenting on a verse of the Qur'an in which it is written of the Jews:

And some there are of them that are common folk not knowing the Book, but only fancies and mere conjectures. [Qur'an 2:77, Arberry translation]

In the text of this *ḥadīth* as recorded by al-Ṭabarsí, Imam Hasan al-'Askari cites a Tradition from the sixth Imam, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣádiq:

A man said to aṣ-Ṣádiq (AS): And if these Jews cannot understand the Book, they have no alternative except by means of what they hear from their scholars. So how can

they be blamed for their following and accepting what their scholars tell them. And are the ordinary [illiterate] Jews any different from our ordinary [illiterate] people who follow their scholars?

He [Imam aṣ-Ṣādiq] (AS) said: Between our ordinary people and our scholars and the ordinary people of the Jews and their scholars there is one difference and one similarity. With regard to the similarity, God blames our ordinary people for their following (*taqlīd*) of their scholars just as He blames their ordinary people. With regard to the difference He does not.

He [the man] said]: Explain this to us, O descendant of the Apostle of God.

He [Imam aṣ-Ṣādiq said] (AS): The ordinary Jews have realized that their scholars were quite obviously lying, they were eating what was forbidden and taking bribes, they altered their judgments on the basis of intercessions, bribes and patronage, they knew them to be partial in their judgments allowing their personal likes and prejudices to enter into their rulings and giving what rightfully belongs to one person to another. They knew in their hearts that a person who acts in this manner is corrupt and it is not permissible to follow them or to accept as being from God or from an intermediary of God what comes from their mouths. And their blameworthiness is on account of their following one whom they knew and understood that it was not permissible to accept what he said or to act on his advice. It is obligatory for them to guard themselves in the cause of the Apostle of God (SAWA) when the evidence is so clear that it cannot be concealed and so obvious that it does not need to be explained.

Thus the ordinary Muslims when they know that their religious leaders are guilty of open corruption, prejudice, involvement with the dross of this world,

favoritism towards their own however much they may be unrighteous, and turning a blind eye towards those who oppose them however much they may be in the right. If any ordinary Muslims follow such religious leaders, then they are like the Jews whom God has blamed for their following (*taqlíd*) of the corruption of their religious leaders. And as for whoever among the religious legal scholars (*fuqahá*) guards himself, defends his faith, opposes his passions and obeys the commandments of his Lord, it is then the duty of the ordinary people to follow [or pattern themselves upon or emulate] him, and this applies to only some of the Shi'i religious legal scholars not all of them ...³

This Tradition is very long and goes on for another page after this point, but what we have given is enough for our purposes. The full Tradition is also given in a few other reliable sources, such *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*⁴ by al-Hurr al-'Amili, as well as the *Tafsir al-Burhan* by Sayyid Hashim Muhaddith al-Bahrani (d. 1107AH)⁵ and the *Bihar al-Anwar* of Muḥammad Baqir Majlisi.⁶

However, when this Tradition is being cited by Usuli Shi'i scholars discussing *ijtihad*, the division of the believers into *mujtahids* and *muqallids* and the position of *marj' at-taqlíd*, it is only one sentence of the long Tradition that interests them and usually this is all they cite. That sentence is:

whoever among the religious legal scholars guards himself, defends his faith, opposes his passions and obeys the commandments of his Lord, it is then incumbent upon the ordinary people to follow [or pattern themselves upon or emulate] him.

فأما من كان من الفقهاء صائناً لنفسه حافظاً لدينه مخالفاً على هواه مطيعاً لأمر
مولاه فللعوام أن يقلّدوه

The reason this sentence is so interesting for these scholars is the last word that that sentence. The last phrase in the sentence

reads: *fa li 'l-awwám an yaqalladunúhu*. The importance of this Tradition for the Usuli Shi'i scholars is in the word *yaqalladunúhu*, which comes from the same second form of the same root Q-L-D as the word *taqlíd* and *muqallid* as used above. Thus the Usuli scholars argue that this Tradition is imposing upon the ordinary Shi'is the obligation to practice *taqlíd* of the *mujtahids*.

The importance of this *ḥadīth* is that, according to Ayatu'llah al-Uzma Shaykh Ja'far Subhani, who is an important contemporary teacher at Qumm, it is the only *ḥadīth* in which a word from this root is used with a meaning that instructs the Shi'is to emulate one of the 'ulamá:

If you were to say: "Is the term "*taqlíd*" mentioned as a subject [in any texts that can be used as an evidential source] for legal rulings, so that we should — before all else — exert an effort to determine its meaning?

I would say: The term "*taqlíd*" only occurs in the text of the *ḥadīth* narrated in the *tafsír* attributed to Imam al-'Askari where he relates on the authority of him [Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq] after some words concerning corrupt 'ulamá: "And as for the religious legal scholars (*fuqahá*)..."⁷

However, Subhani goes on to point out that Shaykh Muḥammad al-Hurr al-'Amili, whose narration of this Tradition he has used and who is a member of the opposing Akhbari school of jurisprudence, states that this Tradition should not be relied upon as it is "weak", being a "*khavar wáhid mursil*" (a tradition with only one chain of transmission), and he further comments that in any case it does not give any authority to *ijtihád* (exerting oneself to come to a legal ruling), *ray'* (legal opinion) and *zann* (legal conjecture) — these being elements of the methodology of the Usuli school.⁸

Many other Usuli scholars have used this *ḥadīth* in their discussion of *taqlíd*. For example, Shaykh Murtada al-Ansari,

the most prominent Shi'i cleric in the time of Bahá'u'lláh, uses in it writing of the permissibility and necessity of following (*taqlíd*) of a faqih.⁹ It is also in connection with this question of the permissibility of *taqlíd* that Khomeini uses this *ḥadīth* in *Tahdhib al-Usul*, a record of his discussions with his senior students (see below).

This *ḥadīth* has also been pulled into the discussions over the doctrine of *Viláyat-i Faqih* (Rule by the Religious Legal Scholar) propounded by Ayatu'llah Khomeini. Sayyid 'Abdu'l-Ḥusayn Lari, who was a fiercely conservative cleric who came to power in the region south of Shiraz during the turbulent period after the Constitutional Revolution and instituted a persecution of the Bahá'ís that resulted in the Third Nayriz Upheaval in 1909 with the death of 18 Bahá'ís, cites this *ḥadīth* as evidence for the role of the cleric in political affairs. Recent publications have even credited him with using the term "*viláyát-i faqih*" in his interpretation of this *ḥadīth*. In an article in the 14th volume (2011-2012) of the periodical *Political Sciences* published by the Office of Islamic Propagation of the Qumm Seminary, there is an article by Akhtar Shahr 'Alí with the title "*Viláyát-i Faqih from the viewpoint of Sayyid 'Abdu'l-Ḥusayn Lari*," in which the author writes:

Ayatu'llah Lari considers the "*Viláyát-i Faqih*" to be the regulator of all affairs and for all laws, parliaments and consultative councils to be conditional upon it. For the removal of the obstacles to the implementation of the Divine laws that occurred during the Constitutional Revolution and as a counter to the deviation of the Constitutional Movement towards the West, he asserts that this principle [the *viláyát-i-faqih*] is the guarantor overall for all intellectual and practical matters. He has said:

The overall guarantor and what brings together the intellectual and practical aspects of national affairs and removes active obstacles is the Vilayat-i Faqih,

the weightiness of which we can understand from the valuable commentary of Imam Hasan 'Askari: "And as for the religious legal scholars (*fuqahá*), he must guard himself ..." ¹⁰

The author gives the reference for this quotation from Lari as being the latter's treatise: "Qanún-i Mashrutah-yi Mashru'ah." However, if one looks at this treatise as published in 1374/1995 in a compilation of treatises about the Constitutional Revolution, sixteen years before Akhtar Sháhr 'Alí's article, one finds this quotation but without any use of the term "viláyát-i faqíh":

The overall guarantor and what brings together the intellectual and practical aspects of national affairs and removes (*faqd*) active obstacles are the words in the commentary of al-'Askari: "And as for the religious legal scholars (*fuqahá*), he must guard himself ..." ¹¹

That this should be case is no surprise to those who have observed 35 years of forgery and deceit regarding the Bahá'í Faith that appears to be the standard for scholarship in Iran since the Islamic Revolution.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Interpretation of the Tradition of the Sixth and Eleventh Imams

'Abdu'l-Bahá also noted and took a great interest in this same Tradition of the Sixth Imam recorded by the Eleventh Imam. And furthermore he was interested in exactly the same sentence in this long *ḥadīth* as the one that the Shi'i clerics focused on.

In *Secret of Divine Civilization*, after writing about the learned (*'ulamá*) who "walk the straight pathway and are versed in the secrets of divine wisdom and informed of the inner realities of the sacred Books; who wear in their hearts the jewel of the fear of God, and whose luminous faces shine with the

lights of salvation” and stating that these are “*lamps of guidance among the nations, and stars of good fortune shining from the horizons of humankind ... [the] fountains of life for such as lie in the death of ignorance and unawareness, and clear springs of perfections for those who thirst and wander in the wasteland of their defects and errors ... [t]hey are skilled physicians for the ailing body of the world, they are the sure antidote to the poison that has corrupted human society*” [SDC 32-33], ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes on to state “*For everything, however, God has created a sign and symbol, and established standards and tests by which it may be known.*” He then says that the learned (*‘ulamá*) must:

be characterized by both inward and outward perfections; they must possess a good character, an enlightened nature, a pure intent, as well as intellectual power, brilliance and discernment, intuition, discretion and foresight, temperance, reverence, and a heartfelt fear of God. [SDC 33-34]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then seeks to define who can truly be regarded as being one of these learned that he has described in such glowing terms. It is in doing this that quotes the *ḥadīth* that we are considering in this paper:

An authoritative Tradition states: “As for him who is one of the learned: he must guard himself, defend his faith, oppose his passions and obey the commandments of his Lord; it is then the duty of the people to pattern themselves after him.” [SDC 34]

و اما من كان من العلماء صائناً لنفسه و حافظاً لدينه و مخالفاً لهواه و مطيعاً
لأمر مولاه فللعوام ان يقلدوه

The only substantive difference between the form of this *ḥadīth* as quoted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the form quoted by most of the Shi‘i scholars is that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “*As for him who is one of the learned (al-‘ulamá) ...*,” while the form of the

ḥadīth used by most Shī'ī scholars states: "As for him who is one of the religious legal scholars (*al-fuqahá*)." However the form cited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not unknown in Shī'ī books. Shaykh Murtada al-Ansari, who as noted above quotes this *ḥadīth* with *al-fuqahá*, elsewhere in the book quotes a shortened form of this *ḥadīth* using *al-'ulamá*: "As for him who is one of the learned (*al-'ulamá*) and defends his faith, it is then the duty of the people to pattern themselves after him."¹²

So important does 'Abdu'l-Bahá consider this *ḥadīth* that he then devotes the next 65 pages (in the English translation of the book) to a detailed consideration and interpretation of this *ḥadīth*. In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spends over one half (65 of the 116 pages of the English translation) of one of only a few books that he wrote examining this *ḥadīth*. He analyzes the *ḥadīth* phrase by phrase in great detail:

- pp. 34-40: "*guard himself*" — which 'Abdu'l-Bahá takes to mean "*to acquire spiritual and material perfections.*" He then enumerates what he means by "perfections." The first of these perfections is "learning." In expanding on the learning that should be acquired, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes beyond the learning traditionally acquired by the Islamic scholars. To the usual branches of Islamic learning such as "*a thorough knowledge of those complex and transcendental realities pertaining to God, of the fundamental truths of Qur'anic political and religious law,*" he adds: "*the contents of the sacred Scriptures of other faiths, and of those regulations and procedures which would contribute to the progress and civilization of this distinguished country*" as well as "*the laws and principles, the customs, conditions and manners, and the material and moral virtues characterizing the statecraft of other nations, and should be well versed in all the useful branches of learning of the day, and study the historical records of bygone governments and peoples*" [SDC 35]. He then makes a diversion in a matter of pressing concern: the need to establish a uniform code of law (the Islamic scholars were used to giving varying judgements

according to their own understanding and this caused a chaotic situation within the country as litigants sought out a scholar who would rule in their favour). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá then goes on to list a large number of other “*perfections, such as justice and impartiality, sincerity and purity of purpose, to fear God, to love God by loving His servants, to exercise mildness and forbearance*” [SDC 39-40].

- pp. 41-59: “*defend his faith*” — which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá takes to mean that rather than just observing the outward forms, observances and laws of the religion, every effort should be made to promote and advance the Word of God. However, the Word of God should be spread not by the sword, but by words and in particular by deeds, living a life that attracts others to your faith.
- pp. 59-71: “*opposes his passions*” — which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá regards as the “the very foundation of every laudable human quality; indeed, these few words embody the light of the world, the impregnable basis of all the spiritual attributes of human beings. This is the balance wheel of all behavior, the means of keeping all man's good qualities in equilibrium [SDC 59]. This is the reason that he condemns the peoples of Europe as drowning “*in this terrifying sea of passion and desire*” and “*morally uncivilized*” [SDC 60, 63]. He calls for a general peace conference at which binding treaties will be made and mutual security established.
- pp. 71-99: “*obedience to the commandments of his Lord*” — here ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that “*that man's highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that his greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honor, depend on his close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions. Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books. Briefly, it is demonstrable that in this life, both outwardly and inwardly the mightiest of structures, the most solidly*

established, the most enduring, standing guard over the world, assuring both the spiritual and the material perfections of mankind, and protecting the happiness and the civilization of society – is religion” [SDC 71-72]. In this section he refutes the opinions of writers like Voltaire who repudiated religion and by a brief historical survey seeks to establish that religion is the cause of the honour and elevation of humanity and when religion is cast aside, disunity and degradation follows.

Contested Interpretations

It is interesting then that the Shi'i Islamic scholars and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both attach great importance to this *ḥadīth* and that furthermore they single out the same sentence in that *ḥadīth* for their special consideration. What is even more remarkable is that their interpretations of this one sentence are so completely different that one would think they were examining two completely different *ḥadīth*.

The Shi'i scholars look at the sentence and see only the beginning and they end: “And as for whoever among the religious legal scholars (*fuqahá*) ... it is then the duty of the ordinary people to pattern themselves upon him.” They take for granted and without discussion that the Shi'i scholars will fulfill the requirements of the middle of the sentence: “guards himself, defends his faith, opposes his passions and obeys the commandments of his Lord.” All of their concern is to argue that this *ḥadīth* makes it incumbent upon the ordinary Shi'is to follow or pattern themselves upon the religious legal scholars – the *mujtahids*. It gives authority for the doctrine of *taqlíd* and for the division of the Shi'is into *mujtahids* and *muqallids*. Incidentally, the only one of the Shi'i clerics that pays any attention to the middle part of this sentence and to the context of the Tradition as a whole is Ayatu'llah Khomeini, and this he does for a political purpose. In *Tahdhib al-Usul*, a collection of the debates that he had with his senior students, he refers to the

middle section of this *ḥadīth* in making the point that the purpose of the central part of this passage is that the *fuqahá* that a person should refer to should not be one of the corrupt *fuqahá*, by which he means those clerics who surrounded and supported the Pahlavi court.¹³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the other hand more or less ignores the beginning and end of this sentence which the Shi‘i scholars find so important. His focus is on the middle of the sentence the four phrases: “he must guard himself, defend his faith, oppose his passions and obey the commandments of his Lord.” He uses this *ḥadīth* as a framework within which to expound upon the necessary spiritual qualities that the individuals must attain in order to allow their society and indeed civilization to progress. The emphasis is therefore on ethics and spiritual development rather than religious law. Indeed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, once he has launched his theme in the first page or so, entirely overlooks any idea that this sentence is about religious scholars and addresses it to all humanity, and to statesmen and rulers in particular. The examples he uses and the stories he tells in these 65 pages are almost all about ordinary people rather than religious scholars. He is of course helped in this by the fact that he is using the version of this *ḥadīth* that has the word “*‘ulamá*” rather than “*fuqahá*.” The word “*‘ulamá*” means someone who has knowledge — the learned. Although in present-day usage it relates almost exclusively to Islamic religious scholars, in former times, it was used more widely of philosophers, scientists, physicians and learned statesmen. Indeed in the Safavid period, there was a cadre of people who had undergone religious training and who then went on to take up important position in the government, whom Said Amir Arjomand calls the “clerical estate.”¹⁴

One could argue that if one takes the contested sentence in its context, then probably ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretation is closer to the original meaning. For the *ḥadīth* taken as a whole is not about establishing a station for religious scholars. It is about ethics. It criticizes the Jewish people for following their

religious leaders despite knowing full well how corrupt they were and states that the Islamic community should be different and its religious leaders should maintain high ethical standards. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá's detailed analysis of the ethics of the four central phrases of the sentence is probably more in line with the intent of the *ḥadīth* taken as a whole than the Shi'i scholars use of the *ḥadīth* to justify *taqlīd*. Where 'Abdu'l-Bahá departs even more significantly from the religion of the Islamic scholars and establishes a new pattern for the Bahá'í community is in the manner in which the learning of the Islamic scholars is set aside as a criterion for someone to be "*referred to as learned*" and "*worthy to serve as a model for the believers*" but rather the "*divine qualifications*" outlined in the four central phrases of this Tradition are to be the criteria for the Bahá'í community and these criteria are open to all believers not a religious professional class. [SDC 34]

It should be noted that Bahá'u'lláh also quotes and comments on this same Islamic Tradition in the Lawḥ-i Sulṭán, the Tablet to Nāṣiru'd-Dín Sháh, in the course of writing about the accusations made against Him by the religious leaders of Iran:

Concerning the prerequisites of the learned, He saith: "Whoso among the learned guardeth his self, defendeth his faith, opposeth his desires, and obeyeth his Lord's command, it is incumbent upon the generality of the people to pattern themselves after him...." Should the King of the Age reflect upon this utterance which hath streamed from the tongue of Him Who is the Dayspring of the Revelation of the All-Merciful, he would perceive that those who have been adorned with the attributes enumerated in this holy Tradition are scarcer than the philosopher's stone; wherefore not every man that layeth claim to knowledge deserveth to be believed. [SLH 118]

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¹ *Lane's Lexicon*, Book 1, London: Williams and Northgate, 1863, p. 2557, middle column.

² E.G. Browne during his visit to the shrine records the name as inscribed in the shrine as Ahmad ibn Abi Ṭálib Ṭabarsí, *Year among the Persians* (London: A. And C. Black, 3rd edn. 1950), p. 617.

³ Ahmad al-Ṭabarsí, *al-Ihtijaj* (ed. Sayyid Muḥammad Baqir al-Kharsan), vol. 2, Najaf: Dar al-Nu'man, 1386/1966, p. 263-4

⁴ *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*, Qumm: Mu'assasah Ál-al-Bayt, vol. 27, p. 131-2

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- ⁵ *al-Burhan fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an*, Markaz al-Tabá'ah wa l-Nashr fī Mu'assasah al-Ba'thah, 1410 A.H./1989-90, vol. 1, pp. 256-8.
- ⁶ *Bihar al-Anwar*, Book 2, 2nd printing, Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Wafa, 1304, pp. 87-88. Other sources for much of this long Tradition are: Sayyid Taqi Tabataba'i Qummi, *Mabání Minháj al-Salihin*. Vol. 1, p. 32
- ⁷ *Ar-Rasá'il al-Arba'ah*, vol. 3, p. 122, available at lib.eshia.ir/26502/3/122.
- ⁸ *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*, Qumm: Mu'assasah Ál-al-Bayt, vol. 27, pp. 131-2
- ⁹ *Maṭariḥ al-Anẓár fī 'l-Uṣūl*, (lithograph edition, Tehran: n.p., 1308) p. 290; online at: dlib.ical.ir/site/catalogue/556787 and lib.eshia.ir/13108/1/2/290
- ¹⁰ *Ulum Siyasi*, vol. 14 (1390/2011), p. 7
- ¹¹ Lari, "Qanún-i Mashrutah-yi Mashru'ah" in *Rasa'il Mashrutiyyat* (ed. Ghulam-Husayn Zargari-nizhad), Tehran: Kavir, 2nd printing 1377, p. 396
- ¹² *Maṭariḥ al-Anẓár fī l-Uṣul*, (lithograph edition, Tehran: n.p., 1308) p. 275; online at: dlib.ical.ir/site/catalogue/556787 and lib.eshia.ir/13108/1/275/
- ¹³ Khomeini, *Tahdhib al-Usul: taqrir bahth Sayyid Ruhū'llah Khumayni* (ed. Shaykh Ja'far Subhani), Qum: Mu'assasah al-Nashr al-Islami, 1405 AHQ/1363 AHS/1985, vol. 2, p. 556
- ¹⁴ Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, *passim*, see in index under "sayyids".

In the Presence of the Beloved: Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'*

A Revised Provisional Translation and Notes

Nima Rafiei

One of the central tenets of previous religions is the promise of attainment unto the presence of the Lord on the Day of Judgment for the faithful believers. Within the Islamic dispensation in the Arabic text of the Qur'án, the term *liqá'* and its various derivatives indicates the promise of attainment unto the presence and meeting with the Lord. There is indication in some of the sacred scriptures of the past that attainment unto the presence and meeting the chosen prophets and messengers of God is considered the same as that of God. How significant, therefore, that during the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh so many of His devoted and ardent followers tarried and journeyed long distances to see only a glimpse of Him from afar. Bahá'u'lláh has fundamentally transformed the concept of attainment unto the divine presence in His Revelation. He has written a fascinating and lucid epistle, referred to in this paper as the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'*, in which He unequivocally states that reading it is equivalent to being in His presence. In this paper, we will briefly introduce the Islamic

background of *liqá'*, compare Shí'ih and Bábí-Bahá'í interpretations of attaining the *liqá*, and we will demonstrate that the writings of Bahá'u'lláh infuse and transform the concept of attaining the divine presence to manifold events including being in the presence of God's prophets, messengers and manifestations, reading the divinely revealed scriptures, and undertaking service to mankind with detachment and pure, spiritual motivation.

The title *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'* or "Tablet of the Divine Presence" has been supplied by the renowned Bahá'í author and scholar, 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd Ishráq-Khávarí (1902-1972) in his extensive compilation on the writings of the Central Figures, *Má'idíy-i Ásmání* (vol. 8).¹ For the purposes of this study, the same title will continue to be used. Additionally, the opening of the same tablet is quoted and reproduced by Fáḍíl Mázandarání (1882-1957) in the fifth volume of his book, *Asráru'l-Áthár*.² The text of the tablet has been published in the first volume of the *Áthár-i-Qalam-i A'lá* series, also known as the *Kitáb-i-Mubín*,³ and is based on a copy in the handwriting of the renowned scribe and devoted follower of Bahá'u'lláh, Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín.⁴ Although there is a minor typographical error in the latter version, the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre has provided the authentic text of this tablet for the purposes of this translation and study.⁵ Additionally, the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre has reported that neither the biographical information on the date and location of the revelation of the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'* or the identity of its intended recipients is not known at this time.⁶ Before exploring the text of the tablet in question, we will discuss the Islamic background of the term and phenomenon of *liqá'*.

***Liqá'* in Islamic sources**

While this is not intended to be a thoroughly comprehensive survey, it will serve the purpose of this study well to provide some brief context on the *liqá'* from Islamic sources. The word

liqá' occurs in more than twenty passages in the text of the Qur'án. In most of these instances, it is translated as "meeting" in English to indicate the anticipated meeting with the Lord on the day of Resurrection. In a comprehensive encyclopedia on the Qur'án written by Bahá'u'd-Dín Khurramsháhí, he has provided a thorough and detailed list of the various verb forms and definitions of the word *liqá'*; most occurrences of the word *liqá'* and its various derivations indicate a physical meeting between two persons. He identifies several instances where *liqá'* is used, such as "*Lost are they who deny the meeting with God until 'the Hour' cometh suddenly upon them! ...*" [Qur'án 6:31], and "*But as for those who shall not have believed, but treated our signs and the meeting of the next life as lies, they shall be given over to the torment*" [Qur'án 30:16], and also in this passage "*Taste then the recompense of your having forgotten the meeting with this your day. We, too, we have forgotten you: taste then an eternal punishment for that which ye have wrought...*" [Qur'án 32:14].⁷ Dr. Khurramsháhí has also mentioned that various interpretations of the *liqá'* may occur in a figurative sense in referring to inspiration experienced by individuals.⁸ Ishráq Khávarí has also quoted from and supplied various passages of the Qur'án and Shí'ih ḥadīth sources regarding the *liqá'* in his *Qámús-i-Íqán*.⁹ He demonstrates that throughout history, the various commentators on the Qur'án have had various interpretations of the meaning of *liqá'*, with some quoting verses such as 7:143, in which God tells Moses that He will never see Him to mean that the *liqá'* is likely figurative and not literal, whereas verses from the Súrih of Qíyámah have been quoted to suggest that it is a literal event: "*On that day shall faces beam with light, Out looking towards their Lord...*" [Qur'án 75: 22-23].¹⁰

It would be beneficial and perhaps better serving the interest of the reader to briefly present a contemporary Shí'ih viewpoint and understanding of the *liqá'u'lláh* in order to compare and contrast with statements in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In this space we can refer to one of the writings of

Áyat'ulláh Khumayní, the leader of the Islamic revolution of 1979. In one of his books, Áyat'ulláh Khumayní compiled and interpreted forty ḥadīths of the Imáms and the Prophet Muḥammad. The twenty-eighth quotation supplied by Khumayní is attributed to the sixth Imám, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣádiq, whereupon when Imám Ja'far was asked if God loves to meet those souls who are longing to meet Him, he replied that God too is longing to meet them. The tradition goes on to report that should one dislike the meeting with God, He in turn dislikes having to meet such a soul at the time of his or her death. Khumayní provides his discourse on various aspects of the tradition, not all of which are directly relevant here, but he does make some comments reflecting his attitude and understanding of the *liqá'* and meeting God. He carries out his interpretation as an indirect criticism of Ṣúfí and mystical thought.

Khumayní mentions in one instance “some” of the ‘ulamá have blocked the path of the *liqá’u’lláh* and deny the possibility to directly experience the “revelations of the Divine Names and Essence.”¹¹ He begins by saying that although it is not far-fetched to conceive such a viewpoint, it is hard to maintain and becomes implausible when it is compared with other Qur’anic verses and texts. He then later turns his attention to highlighting the position of “those who have kept open the path of *liqá’u’lláh*” (possibly a reference to mainstream ‘Uṣúlí Shí’ih ‘ulamá); that this path has been kept open by “...the impossibility of fathoming the Divine mystery through universal knowledge (*‘ilm al-kullī*) and by the means of rational thought and the impossibility of encompassing It in mystic experience (*‘Irfán al-shuhúdí*) and by the means of esoteric insight.”¹² From this point on, Khumayní directs his criticism at those who claim “the luminous veil of the Names and the Attributes” can also be removed, whereupon they attain and imagine themselves close to the Essence of God. Khumayní argues that since humanity, in its natural state, is “entrapped in the dark veils of corporeal nature and entangled in the chains of

petty hopes and expectations...and should we come across a man of vision and someone with a heart who attempts to lift the curtain from these veils, we consider it an error and affront..."¹³ it is therefore unimaginable for human beings to be capable of such spiritual transcendence from what he terms the realm of "*mulk*" or "earthly possession." He later clearly states, "Hence, the way to God-seeking is that one should at the outset devote his time to the remembrance of God and acquire the knowledge of God and the Names and Attributes of that Sacred Essence, the usual way from the adept (*masháyikh* [*shaykhs*]) of that science."¹⁴ Khumayní further writes that if one does not learn the "theoretical and practical exercises and austerities" or is "not familiar with learned jargon" then he cannot occupy himself with remembrance of the Beloved.¹⁵ It appears, therefore, that Khumayní's interpretation of attainment unto the divine presence is multi-fold and restrictive to specific criteria; namely, that individuals are only able, upon both seeking and acting upon the knowledge of God through well-learned clergy, and acquiring a working knowledge and understanding of theological practices and highly-specific terminology and concepts, to properly carry out the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. With this in mind, we see that the Bahá'í writings and Khumayní's interpretations of attaining unto and understanding the divine presence are clearly different, as Bahá'u'lláh has ordained that the individual should engage in the search for spiritual truth, detached and uninfluenced by old sciences and methods and standards of religious learning acquired from men.¹⁶

Liqá' in the writings of The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh

The Báb gives an interpretation and discourse on attaining the divine presence within the text of His weightiest book, the Persian Bayán. In the seventh chapter of the third unit of the Persian Bayán, The Báb makes some fundamental statements: first with the opening Arabic verse of the chapter in which He states that the intended meaning of *liqá'u'lláh* is the attainment

of the presence of Him Whom God shall make manifest (*Man Yuzhirihu'lláh*) as none can ever see God in His essence, secondly that the whole of creation hath naught been brought into being save for the attainment unto the presence or meeting with God, and lastly that all who have sought and attained the presence of Him Whom God shall make manifest, have attained unto the divine presence of the Lord.¹⁷ With this interpretive framework in mind, it is important to note that the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* written by Bahá'u'lláh is considered by Bahá'ís as the completion of The Báb's Persian Bayán. Within the text of the *Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh also interprets and defines the meaning of *liqá'*. He brings forward some of the main verses of the *Qur'án* which mention *liqá'* and gives commentary on their true meaning in Persian within a few pages. The passages include: "*They who bear in mind that they shall attain unto the Presence of their Lord, and that unto Him they shall return,*"¹⁸ and "*Let him then who hopeth to attain the presence of his Lord work a righteous work.*"¹⁹ He writes in summary:

The knowledge of Him, Who is the Origin of all things, and attainment unto Him, are impossible save through knowledge of, and attainment unto, these luminous Beings who proceed from the Sun of Truth. By attaining, therefore, to the presence of these holy Luminaries, the 'Presence of God' Himself is attained. From their knowledge, the knowledge of God is revealed, and from the light of their countenance, the splendour of the Face of God is made manifest. [KI 131]

In the following passage, He also states:

Therefore, whosoever, and in whatever Dispensation, hath recognized and attained unto the presence of these glorious, these resplendent and most excellent Luminaries, hath verily attained unto the 'Presence of God' Himself, and entered the city of eternal and immortal life. Attainment unto such presence is possible

only in the Day of Resurrection, which is the Day of the rise of God Himself through His all-embracing Revelation. [KI 131-132]

Elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh affirms this same definition in His *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*:

In all the Divine Books the promise of the Divine Presence hath been explicitly recorded. By this Presence is meant the Presence of Him Who is the Dayspring of the signs, and the Dawning-Place of the clear tokens, and the Manifestation of the Excellent Names, and the Source of the attributes, of the true God, exalted be His glory. God in His Essence and in His own Self hath ever been unseen, inaccessible, and unknowable. By Presence, therefore, is meant the Presence of the One Who is His Vicegerent amongst men... [ESW 118]

The same passage has been quoted by Fáḍil Mázandarání in the second volume of his compilation, *Amr va Khalq*, although it is attributed to the Íqán.²⁰ In another instance, the Tablet of Visitation recited at the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and The Báb refer to the divine presence: “*I bear witness that he who hath known Thee hath known God, and he who hath attained unto Thy presence hath attained unto the presence of God*” [BP 231]. Here we see clearly that Bahá'u'lláh confirms and expands upon what The Báb has written in the Bayán.

It is important to note that beyond the Kitáb-i-Íqán, however, Bahá'u'lláh has created additional definitions or realizations of the *liqá'* in some of His other writings. They indicate the necessity to be a sincere seeker of truth and highlight the relationship between the individual believer and the divinely revealed text. Please note that the following selections of Bahá'u'lláh's other writings do not have matching authoritative or authorized translations at this time and are purely provisional in nature. Bahá'u'lláh has written in a tablet revealed in both Arabic and Persian: “*...This is an epistle from*

Us unto whomsoever among mankind offereth up worship, that it may enchant and draw him nigh unto the sanctified Seat of reunion and Our presence..."²¹ It is important to note the similarity and closeness between the opening verse of this tablet and the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'*. Both here and in the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'*, Bahá'u'lláh has made it possible for the reader to attain unto the divine presence by reading and interacting with the sacred verses with faith and sincerity. Thus, the recitation and reading of the words of Bahá'u'lláh becomes a means by which we attain the presence of God. Beyond reading of the text, Bahá'u'lláh has provided another means for humanity to attain the *liqá'*.

In a Persian tablet, Bahá'u'lláh affirms almost verbatim what The Báb has written in the Persian Bayán regarding the *liqá'u'lláh*: that humanity and the larger creation have not been brought into existence save for the purpose of attaining the presence of the Lord. What is significant about this particular Tablet is that near its conclusion Bahá'u'lláh states that whosoever abides by and clings unto the laws and ordinances of God and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas will be reckoned as those who have attained His presence.²² One may conclude, in conjunction with this and other writings, that Bahá'u'lláh has defined the *liqá'u'lláh* in the light of faithful adherence to both the sacred text and the ordinances contained therein. Furthermore, Fáḍil Mázandarání has quoted a brief excerpt in Persian from the fourth volume of his *Amr va Khalq* where Bahá'u'lláh states that one who is engaged in devoted service to the Faith in the days of God will be considered as one who has attained His presence.²³ In addition to these previous passages, there is a tablet addressed to Samandar²⁴ where Bahá'u'lláh also speaks of the death of the physical body and the passing away from this earthly existence as the "gate" before attaining the presence of God and the means by which re-union with Him is achieved.²⁵

Additional Passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The selections previously quoted from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* indicates the spiritual authority and sovereignty inherent in each of the divine manifestations of God. With this same spiritual, immaterial sovereignty, the Manifestations of God may also determine and judge if an individual human being has fulfilled and attained the *liqá'*. In other tablets and writings to individual believers, Bahá'u'lláh exercises the authority to confirm the recipients as having fulfilled and attained unto the divine presence. For example, in a tablet addressed to an individual named Zayn, Bahá'u'lláh addresses him as such: "*O Zayn! The friends seek the divine presence and so doth God, magnified be His glory!... We beseech God that He aid His chosen ones with the bounty of forbearance, or perchance He may vouchsafe for them the recompense of attaining His presence, He verily is the All-Powerful, the Almighty!*"²⁶ Note the first part of this quote, that both the believers and God desire that they should meet Him and attain His presence; this reads very closely to the ḥadīth attributed to the sixth Imám, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣádiq, quoted earlier in this paper, that if one desires and longs for the meeting with God, God also desires for that individual to attain His presence.

In a tablet addressed to Aba'l-Ḥasan, Bahá'u'lláh lauds and praises him for having heard and read the divine verses and further counsels him not to be saddened by his separation from His presence, as the Pen of the Most-Ancient has recorded Aba'l-Ḥasan as having been granted the recompense of attaining His presence.²⁷ Likewise, in a tablet addressed to an individual named Raḥím, Bahá'u'lláh offers praise and blessings to Raḥím for his desire to attain the presence of "*the Almighty, the Best-Beloved,*" and further counsels him to not be saddened by his remoteness from Bahá'u'lláh, as power rests and has rested with and will always remain in the hand of God, and that

should God will or desire; He will bestow the recompense of the *liqá'*.²⁸ Further to the above mentioned tablets to Zayn and Aba'l-Ḥasan, there are two additional fascinating passages, both very similar to each other, in which Bahá'u'lláh creates a meaningful imagery of the divinely revealed verses of God as the means by which the individual may see God, thus implying one's attainment to God's presence and beholding His appearance. In referring to the revelation of divine verses, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Say: 'O people of the earth! Equate ye not the creation of the verses of God with the creation of any given thing, nor its appearance with the appearance of other things, if ye understand. Verily it is, in its essence, the mirror of God among all of the worlds, and verily it recounteth God and His excellent names, and by it ye are verily guided unto the Straight Path. Through it, God hath created all that hath been and all that is to be.'*²⁹

Passages from the writings and talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The following statements from 'Abdu'l-Bahá may be understood as further elucidation on the *liqá'*, and in some instances, confirmation or clarification of what Bahá'u'lláh has written. The following three passages are currently published and available in Persian, these translations are also purely provisional.

Recall that Bahá'u'lláh defines both earnest service and sincere investigation and belief in the sacred texts as instances wherein human beings may attain the presence of God. The following passages clearly re-iterate and affirm what Bahá'u'lláh has written. *Ishráq-Khávarí* has published a small excerpt in Persian from a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, wherein He states, "*O thou who art certain of God! By liqá' is meant belief in the signs of God...as bodily nearness is of no import, drawing*

near [unto God's presence] is in faith and certitude...."³⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá has also written in a similar passage, "...by nearness (qurbíyyat) [to the divine presence] is meant that of the spirit, not the body...in light of this it is hoped that you may draw nigh [unto God's presence] in every way."³¹ Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also affirms Bahá'u'lláh's statements about service to the Cause of God as having fulfilled attainment unto His presence, "...the reality of 'drawing near' [unto God] is steadfastness in the religion of God, service to His Cause, and offering worship to the divine court of oneness..."³²

Elsewhere, we read in *Foundations of World Unity*:

Praise be to God! you have heard the call of the Kingdom. Your eyes are opened; you have turned to God. Your purpose is the good-pleasure of God, the understanding of the mysteries of the heart and investigation of the realities. Day and night you must strive that you may attain to the significances of the heavenly kingdom, perceive the signs of divinity, acquire certainty of knowledge and realize that this world has a creator, a vivifier, a provider, an architect...In this way may you behold the presence of God and attain to the knowledge of the holy, divine Manifestations. [FWU 65]

In one of His talks delivered in New York in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the members of Mr. Kinney's Bible class as those who desire to approach the presence of God and subsequently counsels them in words similar to those found in Bahá'u'lláh's writings: "*It is my hope that you may put forth your most earnest endeavor to accomplish this end, that you may investigate and study the Holy Scriptures word by word so that you may attain knowledge of the mysteries hidden therein. Be not satisfied with words, but seek to understand the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the words...*" [PUP 459]. It is evident from the above passages that 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly

confirms and in some instances offers some clarification on the meaning behind the *liqá'*.

Kawthar and Liqá'

A similar interpretative mechanism has been applied to other concepts and constructs in the Bahá'í writings. We will provide one example of an Islamic metaphysical construct employed in the writings of The Báb. In one of the major works of The Báb, the Commentary on the Súrih of Kawthar (*Tafsír Súriyih Kawthar*), written for Siyyid Yahyá Dárábí (later designated as the Letter of the Living, Vaḥíd), He identifies the revelation of divine verses from His pen, just as Bahá'u'lláh identifies the divine verses of His pen as a means to attain the presence of God, as the flowing waters from the fountain of *kawthar* in paradise. In one of the passages of this work provisionally translated and quoted by Dr. Nader Saiedi we read:

*The waters of that river [from the Kawthar fountain in paradise] flow forth from my tongue and pen with that which God willeth, imperishable and everlasting...*³³

The Báb, as the Manifestation of God invested with divine authority and sovereignty (in this case, to reveal divine verses), has defined this concept of *Kawthar*, rather than being an abstract physical location attainable only in the realms of Paradise, instead being found and attained in reading the divinely revealed word of God.

Notes on the content of the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'*

Although, as previously mentioned, the recipients of the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'* are not known at this time, Bahá'u'lláh uses specific language to qualify and describe them. They are called “the birds of the most exalted paradise” (*aṭyáru'l Firdaws*). “Firdaws” is a term found in the Qur'án, the highest attainable realm of paradise where the Prophet Muḥammad and other

prophets and messengers of God, martyrs, saints, and the pious dwell. One may infer that Bahá'u'lláh's intent in using this phrase is to indicate that because the recipients have attained a stage in their spiritual growth and search for divine truth, they are symbolically dwelling in such a lofty station. This is further indicated in the same passage when Bahá'u'lláh acknowledges them for their acceptance of His Cause and that the "Concourse on high" has rejoiced because of their belief. It is therefore possible that they may have been recent or new believers to the faith of Bahá'u'lláh who desired to meet Him and be in His presence. Afterwards, Bahá'u'lláh mentions that simultaneously, the denizens of the cities of eternity have raised their cries of grief and lamentation owing to their "burning thirst" despite their nearness to the ocean of His presence. Although it is not explicitly stated, it is possible that Bahá'u'lláh is referring to a recent exile [perhaps to 'Akká] because these recipients did not get to see Him beforehand. He has therefore written this Tablet as a means of attaining His presence. When reading this passage, it seems that Bahá'u'lláh has eliminated this dichotomy between joy and anguish. After mentioning these two phenomena, Bahá'u'lláh writes that they have become one or entwined in the Day of God.

We read near the middle section of the Tablet that Bahá'u'lláh offers blessings and praise for these recipients for having entered "the city." The language itself is at once both simple to follow, yet, also ambiguous. The word for "city" in Arabic is "*madínah*," and this term has a diverse meaning in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In one instance, it can refer to a literal town, city, or place where the Manifestation of God is dwelling, and in the other, it is highly figurative by referring to stages of spiritual progress of the individual. In this particular connection, it is interesting that Bahá'u'lláh makes reference to the "city of eternal and immortal life" in His discourse and interpretation of the *liqá'* in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, as well as in in this Tablet, where He writes that the recipients of the *Lawḥ-i-*

Liqá' are blessed for having entered "the city." Perhaps Bahá'u'lláh is invoking the same city He mentioned in the Íqán.

Conclusion

The *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'* and other passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh bring about a figurative and meaningful understanding of what it means for humanity to attain the divine presence. Whereas in previous religious dispensations this idea and others were and still are understood to be literal and physical events that have yet to occur, Bahá'u'lláh confirms that the presence of God will be attained and realized in multiple instances including being in the physical presence of His manifestations, reading the divinely revealed texts with sincerity, and carrying out acts of service with utmost detachment and purity of motive.

Bahá'u'lláh's "*Lawḥ-i-Liqá'*," or "The Tablet of the Divine Presence"

1. First translation, published in 1928

For the reference and use of the reader, the text of the first published translation of the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'* will be provided below. It is not known who carried out this translation; it is included in the *Bahá'í Scriptures* compilation published in 1928, within the chapter entitled, "The Degrees of Devotion." The text is as follows:

276. He is the Everlasting Being!

This is a message which We have appointed as Our meeting for those who advance toward God in this Day in which all countries are changed.

The one who reads that which is revealed in this Tablet from the direction of the Throne and doubts the reality

of meeting his Lord; verily, he is of those who deny God, who causeth the mornings to break forth!

O birds of Paradise! Hear the voice of the Beloved in these days wherein the feet of the people deviate.

On account of your advancement the Supreme Concourse hath rejoiced; but because of your not having attained the meeting, and being thirsty while near the ocean, the cry of mourning and weeping has been raised by the inhabitants of the cities of eternity.

This is indeed good; that this rejoicing and sorrow seem to unite and to embrace one another in the Day of God, the Omnipresent, the Dear, the Chosen!

The bellies of the polytheists are burned by that which We have uttered aforetime, and for this reason they dissemble day and night against My soul.

Blessed are you, since ye have entered the city and attained that which your Lord, the Dear, the Giver, desireth.

It is incumbent upon you that gladness and exultation shall be manifest in your faces; so that every soul may find you in submission and forbearance. Thus it is preordained from the Pen of El-Abha. Verily, your Lord the Merciful is the knower of that which is secret and manifest!

Ye are in the shadow of My providence and under the Dome of My mercy. Verily, the sight of God is directed toward you, O ye possessors of clear insight.

Blessed are ye; those who love you and those who advance toward you sincerely, for the sake of God, the Dear, the Almighty!

God beareth witness, and those who are encircling the Throne, that ye have victoriously attained His meeting, and have circulated around the Holy of Holies of His

Cause, and were present before His Face. Verily, He is the powerful over all that He wisheth! There is no God but He, the Dear, the Bestower!

By Myself! We have accepted from you that which ye desired, and We will be with you in all times. El-Bahá be upon you on the part of the Dear, the Helper! [BS 188-189]

2. New provisional translation

He is the Eternal!

Lo, We made this epistle to be the attainment of Our presence for such as have turned unto God in these days, wherein the nations have been made to tremble. Whosoever gazeth upon that which hath been sent down from the Throne of glory in this Tablet and findeth himself in doubt as to whether he hath attained the presence of his Lord, he is of them who have turned away from God, the One Who causeth the dawn to break. O ye birds of the most exalted paradise! Give ear unto the call of the Beloved in these days wherein the feet of men have slipped. The Concourse on high have rejoiced by reason of your acceptance of this Cause, and the voice of the denizens of the cities of eternity hath been raised aloud in grief and lamentation by virtue of your remoteness from Him and your burning thirst, notwithstanding your nearness to the Ocean of His presence!

O how glorious is this blissful joy, this bitter anguish! Methinks both have embraced in the Day of God, the Powerful, the Almighty, and the Omnipotent! The hearts of the infidels have been set ablaze by that which We have revealed aforetime, and still they plot against Me day and night!

Blessed are ye for having entered the city and attained unto that which hath been ordained by your Lord, the Mighty, and the Bestower. It behooveth you to show forth from your countenances utmost joy and bliss that all may discern in you the tokens of resignation and submission. Thus hath it been decreed by the pen of Glory; verily, your Lord is the Most Merciful, the Knower of the unseen and the seen. O men of insight! Ye are beneath the shadow of My loving kindness and the canopy of My mercy, thus is the gaze of God fixed upon you. Blessed are ye and whosoever loveth you and turneth unto you wholly for the sake of God, the Almighty, the All-Compelling. God and such as have circled round the Throne bear witness that ye have attained unto His presence, circumambulated the Kaaba³⁴ of His command, and beheld His countenance. Potent is He over whatsoever He willeth. No God is there but Him, the Mighty, the Munificent! By My life! We have granted that which ye have desired, and We are with you at all times. The glory of Him Who is the Almighty and the Helper rest upon you!

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- * The Rodwell English translation of the Qur'án was referred to in this paper.

NOTES

- ¹'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd Ishráq-Kḥavári, *Má'idíy-i Ásmání* (Tihrán: Mu'asassiy-i Millíy-i Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, 129 B.E.), vol. 8:167-68.
- ²Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil Mázandarání, *Asráru'l-Áthár* (Tihrán: Mu'asassiy-i Millíy-i Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, 128 B.E.), vol. 5: 68-69.
- ³*Áthár-i-Qalam-i A'lá vol. 1* (Dundas, Ontario: Mu'asassiyih Ma'árif-i Bahá'í, 153 B.E.), 390.

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Mubín* (Tihrán: Mu'asassiy-i Milliy-i Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, 120 B.E.), 355.

⁵ On page 390 of *Áthár-i-Qalam-i A'lá* vol., p. 390, the text of the *Lawḥ-i-Liqá'* reads in the second to last sentence,

“... انه لهو المقتدر على ما تشاء لا اله الا هو العزيز المنان.”

The boldened term “*tashá*” (تشاء) should instead be read as “*yashá*” (يشاء) as is reflected in the authentic type-script of this tablet.

⁶ I am very grateful for the efforts exerted by the friends serving in the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre for providing me with a type-script of the authentic text of this tablet and for also providing me with a copy of an early English translation that was published in 1928. This earlier English translation was helpful in ensuring a proper reading of the Arabic text. It will be included at the end of this paper for the reference of interested readers; it should be noted that the current provisional translation was completed before receiving a copy of the earlier translation.

⁷ Bahá'u'd-Dín *Khurramsháhi*, *Dánishnámíy-i Qur'án Va Qur'án Pazhúhí* (Tihrán?: Intishárát-i Dústán, 1998), vol. 2: 1937-38.

⁸ *Khurramsháhi*, *Dánishnámíy-i Qur'án Va Qur'án Pazhúhí*, vol. 2: 1938.

⁹ 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd *Ishráq-Khávarí*, *Qámús-i-Íqán* (Tihrán: Mu'asassiy-i Milliy-i Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, 128 B.E.), vol. 3: 1343-48.

¹⁰ *Ishráq-Khávarí*, *Qámús-i-Íqán*, vol. 3: 1344.

¹¹ Áyat'ulláh Rúḥ'u'lláh *Khumaynī*, *An Exposition on Forty Aḥadīth Narrated through the Prophet and His Ahl al-Bayt, may peace be upon them*. (Qum: Ansariyan Publications?) e-book edition, p. 390.

¹² *Khumaynī*, *Ibid*, p. 390.

¹³ *Khumaynī*, *Ibid*, p. 392.

¹⁴ *Khumaynī*, *Ibid*, p. 394.

¹⁵ *Khumaynī*, *Ibid*, p. 394-95.

¹⁶ For instance, refer the first page of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán*.

¹⁷ Báb, 'Alí Muḥammad *Shirází*, *Bayán-i-Fársí* (Tihrán?: n.p.), 81-82.

¹⁸ Qur'án 2:46 Rodwell.

¹⁹ Qur'án 18:111 Rodwell.

²⁰ Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil Mázandarání, *Amr va Khalq* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1986), vol. 2: 166-67.

²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *La'álíyu'l-Hikmat* (Rio De Janeiro: Editora Bahá'í, 1996), vol.2: 108. (Provisional translation by author.)

²² Vahíd Ra'fatí, *Yádnámíy-i Miṣbáḥ-i Munír* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2006), 390-91.

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- ²³ Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil Mázararání, *Amr va Kḥalq* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1985), vol. 4:160.
- ²⁴ It is likely that the recipient was the Apostle of Bahá'u'lláh, Shaykh Kázim Samandar.
- ²⁵ Ishráq-Kḥavari, *Má'idiy-i Ásmání*, vol. 8:95.
- ²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *La'áliyū'l-Ḥikmat*, vol. 2: 206-7. (Provisional translation by author.)
- ²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *La'áliyū'l-Ḥikmat*, vol. 2: 174-75.
- ²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *La'áliyū'l-Ḥikmat* (Rio De Janeiro: Editora Bahá'í, 1991), vol. 3: 153-54.
- ²⁹ *Áthār-i-Qalam-i A'lá* vol. 1, p. 286. (Provisional translation by author.) The other passage is found in *La'áliyū'l-Ḥikmat*, vol. 2, p. 40. Due to the close similarity of the two passages, the first citation is sufficient to reproduce here.
- ³⁰ 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd Ishráq-Kḥavari, *Má'idiy-i Ásmání* (Tihrán: Mu'asassiy-i Milliy-i Maṭbú'at-i Amrí, 122 B.E.), vol. 9: 13. (Provisional translation by author.)
- ³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (n.p.: Mu'asassiy-i Milliy-i Maṭbú'at-i Amrí), vol. 2: 270. (Provisional translation by author.)
- ³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 2: 149. (Provisional translation by author.)
- ³³ Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 72.
- ³⁴ *Kaaba* (كعبة) is a reference to the point of adoration, where worship is directed. In Islám, the *Kaaba* is identified as the city of Mecca, the spot constructed by the prophet Abraham, which had later been used to house pagan idols.

Poetry in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings and Utterances

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

Abstract

As Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “the Prophets of God do not teach the arts,” which are “an expression of the people.” However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who Himself wrote a few poems in Persian and in Turkish, has left good guidance on the issue of poetry, and any aspiring poet or reader of poetry would benefit from becoming familiar with His words. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions at least seven aspects of poetry: inspiration, beauty, eloquence, a versified language, novelty, expressivity, depth and loftiness of meanings. He moreover sets forth clear concepts on the purposes of poetry. The authors examine ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words in the light of verses from His poems in Persian language.

Introduction

As Shoghi Effendi pointed out in a letter written on his behalf to an individual on 3 February 1952, “the Prophets of God do not teach the arts,” which are “an expression of the people” [qtd. in CC3:31, no.63]. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who

Himself wrote a number of poems in Persian and in Turkish, has left good guidance on the issue of poetry, and any aspiring poet or reader of poetry would benefit from becoming familiar with His words. An early study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s poems has been published in Persian, under the title of “The poems by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Ash‘ár-i-Ḥaḍrát-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*),” by Behrouz Jabbari, an Iranian Bahá’í scholar residing in Canada, in *Khúshihá’iy-i-az kharman-i-adab va khwanar* 14:281-300. Jabbari quotes nine poems in Persian as well as three in Turkish, while mentioning that the number of Turkish poems ascribed to the Master is a little higher. He writes that a letter from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, whose date and addressee he does not mention, lists only 8 poems by the Master. The present authors also found a tenth poem, which is part of a Tablet, published in *Majmú‘iy-i-Makátíb* 13:141-3 and in *Makátíb* 1:414. Jabbari’s paper gives the sources of the poems, except for one of them, but does not mention the circumstances of their composition. For most poems, he gives a short commentary on its formal features. He translates into Persian two of the three Turkish poems and four verses of the third one. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Persian poems that we have found in the available Persian literature are as follows, listed in the order adopted by Jabbari:

1. *Sínáy-i-Ḥaqq pur núr shud* (12 verses), which may be paraphrased as “The Sinai of God was filled with light” [Jabbárí 289-90];
2. *Ay Gul-rukh-i-Abhá-y-i-man!* (18 verses), which may be paraphrased as “O my Abhá rose-cheek” [Majmú‘iy-i-Makátíb 55:340-2; Muntakhabátí az Makatíb 2:17, Jabbarí 290-1];
3. *Ay Khudáy-i-Pur-‘Aṭáy-i-Dhu’l-Manán* (8 verses), which may paraphrased as “O God of all graces and Lord of all bounties” [SWAB 202, sec. 174] [Majmú‘iy-i-Makátíb 13:411-2; Majmú‘iy-i-Munájáthá 135-7; Munájáthá 51-2; Adhkáru’l-Muqarrabín 2:135; Jabbari 291-2]; Jabbari describes this poem as a prayer and a *mathnaví* (see below);

4. *În ḥalq-i-Bahá dar ḥalqih fitád* (9 verses), which may be paraphrased as "This flock of Bahá was ensnared" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 21:234; Munájáthá 19-20; Rafati, Ma'ákhidh 2:239, Jabbari 292]; this poem is sometimes considered a prayer; Jabbari describes it as a *ghazal* (see below);
5. *Dast-i-karam bi-gushá* (12 verses), which may be paraphrased as "Draw forth the hand of generosity" [Majmú'iy-i-Munáját 18-9, Jabbari 292-3];
6. *Núr-i-hudá tábán shudih* (8 verses), which may be paraphrased as "The light of guidance shines" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 13:205-6; Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 88:312; Muntakhabátí az Makátíb 2:18, Jabbari 293];
7. *Sham'-i-shabistán-i-Ḥaqq* (9 verses), which may be paraphrased as "O torch in the Divine chapel" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 13:203-4; Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 55:237-9; Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 88:55-6; Majmú'iy-i-Munáját 49-50; Jabbari 293-4]; Jabbari describes it as a *ghazal* (see below);
8. *Anvár-i-Ḥaqq rukhshán shudih* (17 verses), that may be paraphrased as "The lights of God glisten" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 13:207-8; Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 55:132-5; Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 88:313; Jabbari 294];
9. *Ay murdiy-i-bí-ján-u dil* (9 verses), which may be paraphrased as "O thou who art lifeless in your heart and soul" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 13:206; Muntakhabátí az Makátíb 4:139, Jabbari 295]; Jabbari writes that this poem is not mentioned in the above mentioned letter by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice;
10. *În 'Ahd-i-Alast ast ín* (3 verses, in a short Tablet), which may be paraphrased as "This is the Day of the Eternal Covenant" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátíb 13:142-3, Makátíb 1:414; this poem is not recorded in Jabbárí's paper].

As far as we know, only the second verse of poem no. 7 has been authoritatively translated into English [see SWAB 270, sec.

218]. In this paper we propose our own paraphrases of a few of the verses authored by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions in His Writings and utterances at least seven aspects of poetry: inspiration, beauty, eloquence, a versified language, novelty, expressivity, depth and loftiness of meanings. He moreover sets forth clear concepts on the purposes of poetry. We will now examine these aspects of poetry in the light of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s poems.

Inspiration

Inspiration has been described as: “A special immediate action or influence of the Spirit of God ... upon the human mind or soul” [OED 7:1036]. It also has been defined as:

A sudden enlightenment of the spirit, which appears as a guidance for one’s behavior emerging from unknown depths of one’s personality and coordinating past and future experience through intuitive ways ... Influence exerted by God upon a person, who is enlightened in his mind, spurred in his will, directed and sustained in his action, for the attainment of a supernatural goal ... an impulsion (considered of divine origin or arising from a mysterious force or an inner wealth) which ... leads a person, in a sort of enrapture or creative ecstasy, to translate circumstances, impressions, feelings, etc. into works of art. [Battaglia 8:593]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained that “inspiration” is the “*influx*” [PUP 22] or “*the promptings or susceptibilities of the human heart*” [PUP 254]. He added that the human heart may be influenced both by “*satanic*” and “*divine promptings*” [PUP 251] The former ones, which He also calls “*imagination*” [ibid.], come from our lower self. The latter ones are a “*prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance*” [PUP 254]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also says that imagination “*can only picture that which it is able to create*” [PT 11, 5.6], that it is “*accidental (or non-essential)*” [TAB

3:562], limited and often at odds with reality. Therefore He seemingly uses the term “imagination” in these contexts as “a creative power of the mind that conceives dreams, illusions, abstractions, fictitious and bizarre forms, activities of idle thinking, of conjecturing” [Battaglia 7:342]. He wrote that we can differentiate between “*inspiration*” and “*imagination*,” because “*inspiration is in conformity with the Divine Texts, but imaginations do not conform therewith*” [TAB 1:195]. Another difference is that the ideas “*which owe their source to the Light of Truth will be realized in the outward world; while others of a different origin vanish, come and go like waves on the sea of imagination and find no realization in the world of existence*” [TAB 2:301]. In this context, we could say that poems written under the impulse of imagination do not give fruits, that is, they are not able to raise noble feelings and thoughts in the souls of their readers.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said that inspiration may be received “during meditation” [PT 187, sec. 54, para. 11]. He also wrote: “*when the heart becometh confident, the imagination of Satan and evil vanisheth away. If the heart becometh absolutely tranquil, suspicion and imagination will entirely pass away*” [TAB 1:104]. He explained this concept in detail:

if thy mind becomes empty and pure from every mention and thought and thy heart attracted wholly to the Kingdom of God, forgets all else besides God and comes in communion with the Spirit of God, then the Holy Spirit will assist thee with a power which will enable thee to penetrate all things, and a Dazzling Spark which enlightens all sides, a Brilliant Flame in the zenith of the heavens, will teach thee that which thou dost not know of the facts of the universe and of the divine doctrine. [TAB 3:706]

And finally He described the condition of a person who receives inspiration from the Holy Spirit:

A real, spiritual connection between the True One and the servant is a luminous bounty which causeth an ecstatic ... flame, passion and attraction. When this connection is secured ... such an ecstasy and happiness become manifest in the heart that man doth fly away (with joy) and uttereth melody and song. Just as the soul bringeth the body in motion, so that spiritual bounty and real connection likewise moveth (or cheereth) the human soul. [TAB 1:195]

Shoghi Effendi explained, in a letter written on his behalf to two believers on 25 January 1943, that inspiration “can be received through meditation” and that “God can inspire into our minds things that we had no previous knowledge of, if He desires to do so” [qtd. in CC2:241, no.1771]. He also made clear, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer on 19 November 1945, that “we cannot say that any inspiration which a person, not knowing Bahá’u’lláh, or not believing in God, receives is merely from his own ego” [qtd. in CC2:241, no.1774].

‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeatedly described art as the fruit of inspiration. Sara Lady Blomfield (1859–1939), one of the earliest Bahá’ís in the British Isles, writes that He said that “All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvelous pictures” [qtd. in CH 167]. Moreover ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reportedly said: “*when you breathe forth the breath of the Holy Spirit from your hearts into the world ... [a]ll arts and sciences will become revealed and the knowledge of God will be manifested. It is not your work but that of the Holy Spirit which you breathe forth through the Word*” [qtd. in Rabb 103].¹ A key to a better understanding of the guidance given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as to poetical inspiration may be found in the following Tablet addressed by Him to a hesitant poet:

O thou who art uttering the mention of God!

Know, that the pure hearts upon which the mysteries of the Kingdom of God are printed and pictured, are reflections one upon another and thus the one can discover the secrets of the other, because such hearts are only mirrors confronting each other on which the secrets of unity, affinity and concord are printed and reflected. Accordingly, it would be possible that a certain servant of the servants of the Merciful might discover a treasured mystery or a preserved sign, whatever his shortcomings or defects might be; yet we do indeed rely upon God the Forgiver. I supplicate Him to deliver us from the pangs of lust and its dangers and from the destructive conditions of passion.

Verily, I do testify that thine heart is moved by the fragrance of the love of God, that thy memory is a fountain overflowing with the water of the knowledge of God. Therefore, finish the poem which thou art composing and send it here, that through reading it the breast of the believers may be refreshed and dilated with joy. [TAB 3:669]

'Abdu'l-Bahá uses in this Tablet the versatile metaphor of light and mirrors. He describes pure hearts as mirrors capable of reflecting "*the mysteries of the Kingdom of God*" [ibid.]. And thus both poets and readers, if they are pure-hearted, may be described as mirrors, and light may be reflected from the poets to the readers and vice-versa. Abdu'l-Bahá writes that "*it would be possible that a certain servant of the servants of the Merciful might discover a treasured mystery or a preserved sign, whatever his shortcomings or defects might be*" [ibid.]. However, as Bahá'u'lláh writes, the light's "*appearance in every mirror is conditioned by the colour of that mirror*" [qtd. in CC3:19, no.22]. And thus the poet should try to be delivered "*from the pangs of lust and its dangers and from the*

destructive conditions of passion” [TAB 3:669], so that his heart may be purified. Then his heart will be “*moved by the fragrance of the love of God,*” and his “*memory*” will be “*a fountain overflowing with the water of the knowledge of God,*” and he will be able to write poems whereby “*the breast of the believers may be refreshed and dilated with joy*” [ibid.]. In other words, the poet’s earnest struggle toward spiritual perfection is the soundest guarantee that his poems may be inspired and thus capable of inspiring their readers with noble ideas and feelings.

As to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s poems, He has been described by Shoghi Effendi in the following exalted terms:

Bahá’u’lláh’s ... most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, ... the embodiment of every Bahá’í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá’í virtue ... the Being “round Whom all names revolve,” ... the “Mystery of God” — an expression by which Bahá’u’lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized. [WOB 133]

And thus His poems may also be expected to convey “the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection ... blended and ... completely harmonized” [WOB 133].

Beauty

Guidance as to what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá meant by “*beautiful words*” [TAB 1:58] may be found in several passages of His works. The following words are an example:

Verily, I chanted thy poem. Its significance was beautiful, its composition eloquent and its words excellent....

...thou hast uttered the praise of thy Lord and expressed significant meanings in eulogy of thy Lord, the Merciful, the Clement....

Verily, I read thy poem, which contained new significances and beautiful words. My heart was dilated by its eloquent sense. I prayed God to make thee utter more beautiful compositions than this....

Chant the verses of guidance among the people and commence [the composition of] melodies of great beauty and effect in praise and glorification of the Generous Lord...

Thy little book of poems, which were very sweet, was read. It was a source of joy, for it was a spiritual anthem and a melody of the love of God.

Continue as long as thou canst this melody in the gatherings of the beloved; thus may the minds find rest and joy and become in tune with the love of God. When eloquence of expression, beauty of sense and sweetness of composition unite with new melodies the effect is ever great, especially if it be the anthem of the verses of oneness and the songs of praise to the Lord of Glory.

Endeavor your utmost to compose beautiful poems to be chanted with heavenly music; thus may their beauty affect the minds and impress the hearts of those who listen. (TAB 1:57-9)

He wrote to a poet: “*Endeavor, so far as it is possible for thee, that day by day thou mayest string the pearls of poesy with sweeter rhythm and more eloquent contents, in order that it may become conducive to the perpetuity of thy name in the spiritual meetings*” [TAB 3:546]. He is reported to have said moreover: “*What is poetry? It is a symmetrical collection of*

words,” and “*it is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection*” [qtd. in Lucas 12]. He also referred to the “*elegant ... context*” [TAB 3:546] of a poem. He finally mentioned “*sweetness of composition*” [TAB 1:59] as well as, in His Tablet to Marie Watson,² “*delicacy*” [qtd. in “Tablets to Bahá’ís” 307]. Therefore rhythm, symmetry, harmony, elegance, sweetness, delicacy and perfection are among the prerequisites of the beauty of a poem that have been mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It may be useful transcribing a few definitions of these words from the most renowned English dictionaries and reflect on their meanings.

Rhythm is defined as

The measured flow of words or phrases ... Due correlation and interdependence of parts, producing a harmonious whole ... The measured recurrence of arsis and thesis determined by vowel-quantity or stress, or both combined; kind of metrical movement, as determined by the relation of long and short, or stressed and unstressed, syllables in a foot or a line. [OED 13:874]

Symmetry is defined as

Due or just proportion; harmony of parts with each other and the whole; fitting, regular, or balanced arrangement and relation of parts or elements; the condition or quality of being well-proportioned or well-balanced. [OED 17:456]

Harmony is defined as

Combination or adaptation of parts, elements, or related things, so as to form a consistent and orderly whole; agreement, accord, congruity ... Combination of parts or details in accord with each other, so as to

produce an æsthetically pleasing effect; agreeable aspect arising from apt arrangement of parts ... Pleasing combination or arrangement of sounds, as in poetry or in speaking; sweet or melodious sound. [OED 6:1125]

Elegance is defined as

Tasteful correctness, harmonious simplicity, in the choice and arrangement of words. [OED 5:129]

Whereas rhythm and symmetry are mainly outward connotations, related to the verbal expressions of poetry, harmony and elegance are a kind of inner rhythm and symmetry between ideas, sentences, and words.

Sweetness is defined as “the quality of being sweet,” and the word *sweet* has many connotations, such as:

Marked by or arising from graciousness, kindness or sympathy ... not intemperate or extreme ... pleasing to the mind or the feeling; arousing agreeable or delightful emotions ... pleasing to the ear: gently armonious: not ... disturbing ... much loved. [Webster 2309]

The idea of an identity between beauty and sweetness in regard to poetry is at odds with the ideas of a number of Western modern poets and literary critics. And yet it was perfectly normal in the past. *Dolce stil novo* (sweet new style) was the name of the poetical School which flourished in Florence in the second half of the twelfth century, and which marks the beginning of Italian literature. And Dante Alighieri, who was among the poets of that School, wrote in one of his most famous sonnets describing Beatrice as his inspiring muse: “her sweetness through the eyes reaches the heart” (*Vita Nuova* 57), which perhaps may be better rendered as “and through your eyes she gives such a sweetness to your heart.”

Delicacy is defined as

Exquisite fineness of texture, substance, finish, etc.; graceful slightness, slenderness, or softness; soft or tender beauty ... Exquisite fineness of feeling, observation, etc.; nicety of perception; sensitiveness of appreciation ... Exquisite fineness or nicety of skill, expression, touch, etc ... A refined sense of what is becoming, modest or proper; sensitiveness to the feelings of modesty, shame, etc.; delicate regard for the feelings of others. [Webster 596]

This connotation of beauty as sweetness and delicacy is reminiscent of other qualities recommended by the Bahá'í teachings, that is, "refinement," "reverence," "respect for that which is sacred," "purity" and "good taste."

As to *refinement*, it is prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas [36, para.46]: "*Hold ye fast unto refinement under all conditions.*" The Arabic word *liṭáfāt*, here translated as "refinement," "has a wide range of meanings with both spiritual and physical implications, such as elegance, gracefulness, cleanliness, civility, politeness, gentleness, delicacy and graciousness, as well as being subtle, refined, sanctified and pure" ["Notes" 199].

As to *reverence*, it is listed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá among the "*inward ... perfections*" that should characterize "*the spiritually learned*" [SDC 34]. He moreover recommended it when visiting the holy places. He wrote in this regard in a Tablet addressed to Ethel Rosenberg: "*You have asked about visiting holy places and the observance of marked reverence toward these resplendent spots. Holy places are undoubtedly centers of the outpouring of Divine grace, because on entering the illumined sites associated with martyrs and holy souls, and by observing reverence, both physical and spiritual, one's heart is moved with great tenderness*" [qtd. in Synopsis 61, no.26].

As to *respect for that which is sacred*, it is mentioned in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual on 24 September 1987 [qtd. in CC3:40, no.82] as “one of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá’í Writings” and as a consequence of the Bahá’í “view of the world” whereby “we perceive creation to encompass spiritual as well as physical entities, and we regard the purpose of the world in which we now find ourselves to be a vehicle for our spiritual progress.”

As to *purity*, it is described by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in a famous Tablet, in which He explained:

To be pure and holy in all things is an attribute of the consecrated soul and a necessary characteristic of the unenslaved mind. The best of perfections is immaculacy and the freeing of oneself from every defect. Once the individual is, in every respect, cleansed and purified, then will he become a focal centre reflecting the Manifest Light. [SWAB 146, no.129]

As to *good taste*, it is mentioned in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual on 23 February 1987 [qtd. in CC3:39, no.81]. The letter says: “the House of Justice feels artists should not be inhibited by Bahá’í institutions from creating a variety of calligraphic renderings of the Holy Writings or of the Greatest Name. However, such efforts should be in good taste and not assume forms that lend themselves to ridicule.” These words may be easily extrapolated into the context of poetry.

Beauty as sweetness and delicacy is also an important bridge between the mainly physical and intellectual prerequisites of rhythm, symmetry, harmony, and elegance and the declared spiritual purpose of poetry of inspiring the heart with lofty ideas and feelings, which will be mentioned later on.

Perfection is defined as

The condition, state, or quality of being perfect or free from all defect; supreme excellence; flawlessness, faultlessness. [OED 11:538]

And also:

... correspondence with or approximation to an ideal concept ... an unsurpassable degree of accuracy or excellence ... complete mastery of technique ... [Websters' 1677]

"Excellence in all things" is such an important goal for the Bahá'ís that the Universal House of Justice issued on 23 November 1981 a specific compilation under the same title [see CC1:367-84], exhorting the Bahá'ís to "follow Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation to distinguish themselves from others through deeds" [MUHJ 510, no.303.1]. But in the arts 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests nothing less than perfection. As He is reported to have said to Mary L. Lucas: "*It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and **perfection** ...*" [12, bold added].

All these prerequisites of beauty — rhythm, symmetry, harmony, elegance, sweetness, delicacy, and perfection — are evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's poems. Unfortunately no translation can convey the qualities of the rhythm, symmetry, harmony, and elegance of the original, especially the rhythm, strictly associated as it is to the sound of the original words.

As to *symmetry*, it is especially evident in the following three-couplets poem, which is part of a short Tablet in prose, on the issue of "the banquet of the eternal Covenant (*bazm-i-alast*)" [Majmú'iy-i-Makátib 13:142]. This short poem is introduced by the following words: "The divine Minstrel took up his lute and begun to intone Persian melodies, giving voice to his harmonious song (*Muṭrib-i-iláhí awtár-i-mathálish va mathání*

bi-dast girift va bi-ahang-i-parsí naghmiḥ va sáz numúd va bi-shahnáz ín tarániḥ ágház kard)” [ibid. 142]. The poem says:

- 1.1. *Ín ‘Ahd-i-Alast ast ín / Paymániḥ bi-dast ast ín*
Bázar shikast ast ín / Az Yúsuf-i-raḥmání.

This is the Day of the Eternal Covenant. The Cup is at hand.

This is a market crash, because of the Divine Joseph.

- 1.2. *Mítháq-i-vifáq ast ín / Paymán-i-ṭaláq ast ín*
Áfát-i-nu‘áq ast ín / Az raḥmat-i-Yazdání.

This is the Covenant of concord. This is the Covenant of repudiation.

This is a calamity for the foreboders of evil, because of the mercy of God.

- 1.3. *Ín ‘Ahd-i-qadím ast ín / Ín Sirr-i-qavím ast ín*
Ín Ramz-i-‘azím ast ín / Az Ṭal‘at-i-Abhá’í.

This is the Ancient Covenant. This is the irrefutable Secret [GPB 39].

This is the great Mystery, because of the Most Glorious Countenance. [Provisional translation by the authors]

The symmetry of these three verses is evident in the Persian text, in the repetition of the locution “*ast ín*,” which means “this is.” In the English translation we see the symmetry of three short consecutive sentences in each verse, very similar to one another, preceding a final locution, introduced by the preposition “because of.”

As to *harmony*, a translation cannot convey the harmony of the original Persian words. But it can convey the harmony of the images used by the Poet. An example are the following successive hemistiches:

Vajh-i-hudá tábán shudih.

The Divine guidance shines brightly.

Khuffásh-há pinhán shudih.

Bats hide themselves in their holes. (*Majmú'iy-i-Makátib* 55:132;
provisional translation by the authors)

In the first hemistich the lights of guidance shine brightly; in the second one, the bats, creatures of the night, hide themselves in their holes.

As to *elegance*, a notable poem is the above mentioned *Īn 'Ahd-i-Alast ast ín* [*Majmú'iy-i-Makátib* 13:142]. The elegance of this poem is especially due to its recurrent use of the word Covenant and of a number of related images: “the cup (*paymáníh*)” [verse 1], the Day of Judgment, “A calamity for the foreboders of evil (*áfát-i-nu'áq*)” [verse 2], “the irrefutable Secret (*Sirr-i-qavím*)” and “the great Mystery (*Ramz-i-'azím*),” and their appearance as the “Most Glorious Countenance (*Tal'at-i-Abhá'í*)” [verse 3]. In this poem the English word Covenant corresponds to three Persian words, *Mítháq*, *Paymán*, and *Ahd*. According to the ancient Sufis these three words have slightly different connotations. The word *Mítháq* is the preeternal covenant mentioned in the so called verse of the Covenant in the Koran: “*And when thy Lord brought forth their descendants from the reins of the sons of Adam and took them to witness against themselves, 'Am I not,' said He, 'your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we witness it'*” [7:172, Rodwell]. *Khawajih Shamsu'd-Dín Ḥáfiz* (1315-1390) writes about this Covenant:

From the dawn of the morn of eternity without beginning to
the end of the evening of eternity without end,

In respect to one covenant and to one agreement (*mítháq*),
friendship with love was. [Divan 343, no. 178, v. 6]

As to the word *Paymán*, the Italian orientalist Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988) writes: “A number of times ... the

concepts of Cup and Pact are linked (and this is something more than a pun between *paymân* and *paymâneh!*): a sip from the cup seals a Primeval Pact between man and God" [*Religion in Iran* 262-3]. Ḥáfiz uses the two words *Paymán* and *Paymáníh* in the following verses:

Last night, to the wine-house (the Ārif, the comprehender of truths), Ḥáfiz, sitting in *khilwat*, went:

From the head of his covenant (*Paymán*), he departed; and to the head of the cup (*paymáníh*), went. [*Divan* 460, no. 257, v. 1]

In this poem 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions "the Covenant of repudiation (*Paymán-i-ṭaláq*).” This may allude to the distinction between the good and the evil ones that will be made on the Day of Judgment as described in the Koran: “*Then the people of the right hand – Oh! how happy shall be the people of the right hand! And the people of the left hand – Oh! how wretched shall be the people of the left hand!*” [56:8-9, Rodwell]. As to the meaning of the Day of Judgment, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: “*This period of time is the Promised Age, the assembling of the human race to the 'Resurrection Day' and now is the great 'Day of Judgment'*” [TAB 2:318]. As to the word *Ahd*, the Sufís considered it as a station of the sincere. Ḥáfiz writes about this Covenant:

Although grief for Thee gave to the wind the harvest of my life,

(Falling) in the dust of Thy precious foot, (I displayed fidelity); for the covenant (*ahd*) (that I had made), I broke not. (*Divan* 645, no. 373, v. 2]

However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seemingly uses this word as a synonym of *Mitháq*, since He writes “*This is the ancient Covenant (Īn Ahd-i-qadím ast ín)*,” and the word *qadím* means in the Sufi usage “without beginning or end” [Steingass 959].

As to *sweetness*, a significant strophe composed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reads as follows:

Áfáq ‘anbar bár shud.

Mushk-i-Khuṭá íthár shud.

Chún nukhat-i-gulzár shud.

Yik shimmih’í az búy-i-Tú.

The universe smells with amber.

Perfumes of musk exhale from Cathay.

Sweet aromas blow from the rose-gardens.

A breath of Thy fragrance. [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátíb* 55:341;
provisional translation by the authors]

The sweetness of this strophe stems from the delicate scents that caress our inner senses.

As to *delicacy*, in His poem *Anvár-i-Haqq rukhshán shudih* [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátíb* 55:132-5], He describes Bahá’u’lláh with a very delicate and refined expression: “the rose-queen of the green expanses (*sulṭán-i-gul dar sahn-i-chaman*)” [verse 13]. Moreover, the Master’s poems are hymns to Bahá’u’lláh. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laments His “remoteness (*hijrán*)” from Him [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátíb* 55:131, verses 15 and 17]; “is thirsty (*lab-tishnih*)” [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátíb* 21:234, verse 7] for Him; and proclaims His love for Him. However, He never mentions the fact that He is His son. Rather He declares Himself “an humble servant (*sag*, literally, dog)” on His “way (*kúy*)” [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátíb* 21:234, verse 9], “dust (*kháq*)” on His “threshold (*dargáh*)” [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátíb* 55:342, verse 17]. The delicacy of these words is the result of the deep humility of a wholly self-effaced Man, Who has been defined by His Father the “Mystery of God” [qtd. in WOB 133], and yet does not show towards His Father a human love, but the love tinged with awe, reverence and respect due to the Manifestation of God.

As to *perfection*, an example are the following verses by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

Án jilviy-i-Rabbu’l-junúd
Rukh dar kuh-i-Şahyún numúd
Karmil nidá-há mí-numúd.

This revealed Lord of Hosts
 Turned His face toward Sion
 And the Carmel resounded

Bá chang-u tár-u náy-u ‘úd
Núr az rukh-i-aḥbáb bín.

With harps and flutes, rebecs and lutes.

Which light from the lovers’ faces! (Jabbari 290, verses 7, 8;
 provisional translation by the authors)

It is the sound of “harps and flutes, rebecs and lutes” rising from Mount Carmel that touches our hearts, as we remember a special time we may have had on that blessed Mount, when our faces too may have glowed with inner light.

Eloquence is defined as

The action, practice, or art of expressing thought with fluency, force, and appropriateness, so as to appeal to the reason or move the feelings. [OED 5:148]

The prerequisite of eloquence requires for poets to be able to say fluently, forcibly, and properly the things they want to say, while at the same time being able to respect the above mentioned prerequisites of beauty.

As to eloquence the following words reported as uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá have been recorded by Isabel Fraser Chamberlain:

I hope that you will all become eloquent. The greatest gifts of man are reason and eloquence of expression. The perfect man is both intelligent and eloquent. He has knowledge and knows how to express it. Unless man express himself in this day he will remain like a closed casket and one cannot know whether it contains jewels or glass. I desire that all of you may speak on the material and divine sciences with clear and convincing words. [ADP 98]

These words are reminiscent of an explanation of the importance of words given by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, which any poet should assimilate so as to make them a part of his own being. He wrote in His Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd that

Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets ... It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station. [TB 172-3]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s eloquence stems from His capacity of exalting this most exalted Day of God through words which are at the same time lofty and plain, refined and simple. A fascinating example is the first part of the poem *Anvár-i-Ḥaqq rukhshán shudih* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 55:132-3], which describes the Day of God, in uncomplicated but enticing words:

1. *Anvár-i-Ḥaqq rukhshán shudih.*
Daryáy-i-Ḥaqq júshán shudih.
Vajh-i-hudá tábán shudih.

The lights of God glisten.
 The sea of God surges.
 His guidance shines brightly.

2. *Khuffásh-há pinhán shudih.*
Abr-i-Karam giryán shudih.
Barq-i-Qidam Khándán shudih.

Bats hide themselves in their holes.
 Clouds rain down their mercy. (SWAB 192, sec. 160; Muntakh
 187)

The Eternal's lightening flashes.

3. *Gulshan faḍáy-i-ján shudih.*
Pur az gul-u rayhán shudih.
Bulbul bi-ṣad alhán shudih.

A paradise for spirits, gardens
 Are covered with flowers and shrubs.
 Dazzled by the face of the rose.

4. *Bar rúy-i-gul ḥayrán shudih.*
Madhúsh-u sar-gardán shudih,
Mast-i-rukh-i-jánán shudih.

The nightingale sings a hundred songs.
 Astonished and confounded,
 It gets drunk with the cheek of the Beloved.

5. *Makhmúr-u ham sakrán shudih,*
Pur áh-u pur afghán shudih.
Súy-i-Khudá nálán shudih.

Seized by its giddiness,
 It raises groans and moans,
 Lifting this plea unto God. [Provisional translation by the
 authors]

These verses eloquently describe the Day of God as a springtime, with its clouds, its rains, its lightnings, its flowers and a nightingale which, drunken with the beauty of the rose, raises its prayer unto God. The verses are short, the words are few, there are few learned references, but the description is graphic and lively.

A versified language

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote in His Tablet to Mr. and Mrs. Deuth that “*eloquent and significant words are compared to pearls. But these pearls are of two kinds, one is the versified language and that is called poetry and the other is the ordinary language called prose*” [“Tablets to Bahá’is” 259]. Of course, since as Shoghi Effendi explained in a letter written on his behalf to an individual on 3 February 1952, “the Prophets of God do not teach the arts; but the tremendous cultural impetus which religion gives to society gradually produces new and wonderful forms of art” [qtd. in CC3:31, no.63], the Bahá’ís cannot think that by verses only the ancient form of verses, based on rhyme or on other rhetorical devices, should be intended. As a matter of fact, the Modern age introduced the so called “free verse” into practically all languages, including Fársí. Free verse, a “loan translation of French Vers Libre,” may be defined as “unmetered and often irregularly lined out unrhymed verse that depends upon extensive variation in rhythm, balanced phrasing, syntactical repetition, and typographical and grammatical oddness to achieve its effects” [Myers and Simms 123]. And thus Bahá’í poets may feel certainly free to use it. In this vein the Bahá’í Canadian poet and writer Jack A. McLean writes:

I've always wanted to write
 a poem in plain speaking,
 without artifice,
 before a critic tells me
 I belong more to the nineteenth
 than to the twentieth century. [54]

'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote His poems more or less in the years when the modern Iranian literature was born, that is, the years of the constitutionalist movement preceding the bourgeois revolution of 1905–1911. Those poets produced a “neoclassic poetry” that “without breaking the old forms,” became “filled with moralistic and social contents” [Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana” 540]. He sometimes follows the ancient rules of Persian metrics, which had remained unchanged for several centuries. In this vein He authored a traditional *mathnaví*, defined by Edward G. Browne (1862–1926), the renowned British Orientalist, as a “poem in ‘doublets,’ which is generally narrative, and where the rhyme changes in each couplet” [1:473], *Ay Khudáy-i-Pur-‘Aṭáy-i-Dhu’l-Manán* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 13:208]. He also wrote three unconventional *ghazals*, the typical Persian, refined “elegy of love” [Blachère, “Ghazal”], *Ín ḥalq-i-Bahá dar ḥalqih fitád* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 21:234], the only poem that He signs in the last line, *Sham‘-i-shabistán-i-ḥaqq* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 13:203-4] and *Núr-i-hudá tábán shudih* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 13:205-6]. He did not write any *qaṣídih*, defined by Brown “purpose-poem” [2:22]. Many of His poetical works are characterized by short verses, a number of them are not monorhymed, as the classical Persian metrics prescribe. And when He uses the classical *radíf*, that is “a word or a whole phrase that follows the rhyme letter (*rawiyy*) and recurs in every line of the poem” [Heinrichs, “Radíf”], He sometimes uses it in a very loose way. For example, in His above mentioned 17 verses poem *Anvár-i-Ḥaqq rukhshán shudih* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 55:132], He uses the rhyme in *-án* and the *radíf shudih* only in the first five verses. Then He changes both the rhyme and the *radíf*. His poetical style is so original

that sometimes it is difficult to write down His poems in a specific classical graphic form.

Novelty

‘Abdu’l-Bahá adds a further quality of poetry: “*new significances*” [TAB 1:58]. In this regard, a Bahá’í poet should consider a number of important points. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said about the twentieth century that “*this is a century of life and renewal*” [PUP 140]. However, not every renewal introduced during that century either conforms with the Bahá’í teachings or may be considered as contributing to the advancement of human civilization. The Universal House of Justice wrote, in its message addressed to the Iranian Bahá’ís throughout the world on 10 February 1980:

Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age. [MUHJ 435, no.246.4]

In these circumstances Bahá’í poets should remember ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s invitation to “*leave imitation and seek reality*” [PUP 169] and His statement on 17 November 1912 that

reformation and renewal of the fundamental reality of religion constitute the true and outworking spirit of modernism, the unmistakable light of the world, the manifest effulgence of the Word of God, the divine remedy for all human ailment and the bounty of eternal life to all mankind. [PUP 439]

Thus they will more likely feel free from the worst “new” aspects of some contemporary poetical Western trends, and

closer to the true modernism, that is the “*renewal of the fundamental reality of religion*” [ibid.].

The idea of novelty and renewal is often explained in the Bahá'í writings through the metaphor of springtime, a metaphor which also perfectly suits poetry. On 19 May 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in this vein: “*though the calendar changes and the years move forward, each springtime that comes is the return of the springtime that has gone; this spring is the renewal of the former spring. Springtime is springtime, no matter when or how often it comes*” [PUP 126-7]. This is not a stale repetition of the ancient pessimistic formula: “*Nullum est iam dictum quod non sit dictum prius* (There is nothing said which has not been said before)” [Terence, *Eunuchus* 41]. Each spring has its novel and its repetitious aspects. The novelty comes from the eternal change characterizing the physical world: ‘All things move and nothing remains still’ [Heraclitus, qtd. in Plato, ‘Cratylus’ 401, section d, line 5]. The repetition comes, in the vegetable world, from the roots of the trees. We may then assume that if a poet wants to be innovative, he needs to be free from imitations either of past or present poets, and understand the above mentioned real great novelty of this age, the renewal of the reality of religion. He will thus be able to be innovative, while at the same time preserving the roots of his civilization, like a tree in the newly arrived springtime. He will contribute to “guarantee the transmittal to the future of those skills which will preserve the marvellous, indispensable achievements of the past” as the Universal House of Justice recommended the Bahá'í youth of the world in a message addressed to them on 8 May 1985 [MUHJ 637, no.428.8].

‘Abdu'l-Bahá, “Bahá'u'lláh's ... most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá'í virtue” [WOB 133], has given an incomparable example of what is suggested by these words. His poems have deep roots in the glorious lyrical past of Iran, but they also present, as has

been said, many innovative elements in prosody, contents and especially in spirit. Besides, in conformity with His idea that the true modernism is the “*renewal of the fundamental reality of religion*” [PUP 439], most of His poems are a joyous announcement of the new spiritual springtime which dawned over the whole world in 1844.

Expressivity

‘Abdu’l-Bahá praised poems which “*expressed significant meanings in eulogy of ... [the] Lord, the Merciful, the Clement*” [TAB 1:58]. Expressivity has been defined in a celebrated dictionary of the Italian language as the capacity

to communicate ... through words orally or in a written form ... a thought, an idea, a feeling, a mood, an emotion, a sensation ... to represent ... in an artistic form, through a given matter or language and in a definite and particular form (feelings, emotions, ideas, conceptions, etc., or one’s spirituality, one’s way of perceiving and conceiving reality). [Battaglia 5:403]

This is a very important aspect of poetry. Whereas a piece of prose may describe an object in a rational way, poetry is supposed to directly convey its meaning. For instance, prose may accurately describe the qualities of a flower, but poetry should be able to create the idea of its beauty and flavour in its readers. And usually poetry fulfils this task through a metaphoric language. In this respect poetry resembles Scripture, which usually explain spiritual truth through images. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often associated the idea of expressivity with the expression of “*the beauty of ... characters and the merit of ... virtues*” [TAB 2:400] and “*of all the bounties of life to mankind*” [PUP 16]. These words may well be also referred to poetry.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s poems perfectly express the joy raised in the hearts of the sincere seekers by the advent of the new Day of

God. One of the most expressive among ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s poems is *Núr-i-hudá tábán shudih* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátíb* 13:205-6]:

8.1. *Núr-i-hudá tábán shudih. Túr-i-tuqá rakhshán shudih.*

Músá bi-ján púyán shudih. Kuhsár Síná ámadih.

The light of guidance shineth. The mountain of virtue
gloweth.

Moses hasteneth with heart and soul. Each mount
becometh a Sinai.

2. *Şubḥ-i-jabín, núr-i-mubín ván ‘áriḍ-i-gulgún bín.*

Bá la ‘l-i-rangíní chun-ín án gharrih gharrá’ ámadih.

Look at the gleaming forehead, at the manifest light, at
the rosy cheek.

With vermillion lips, that snow-white moon hath come.

3. *Hardam nasímí mí-vazad búy-i-‘abíri mí-risad.*

Şubḥ-i-umídí mí-damad, ghabrá’ núra ámadih.

An uninterrupted breeze bloweth, an amber scent wafteth.

The morn of hope ariseth and the world is enlightened.

4. *Daryáy-i-Ḥaqq pur-mawj shud. Har mawj az án yik fawj shud.*

Ván fawj-há bar awj shud: har past bálá ámadih.

The Ocean of Truth swelleth. Its waves grow into billows.

The billows surge. Whatever’s below riseth above.

5. *Şawt-i-ana’l-Ḥaqq har zamán áyad zi-awj-i-ásmán.*

Mí-na-shnavad juz gúsh-i-ján ádhán şammá ámadih.

The call “I am God” resoundeth from on high.

Only the inner ear heareth, the outer one is deaf.

6. *Abr-i-gawhar-bár ast ín, fayḍ-i-durar-bár ast ín.
Núr-i-sharar-bár ast ín, anvár bahrá' ámadih.*

It is a cloud raining pearls. It is a grace spreading jewels.

It is a light emanating sparks, a dazzling splendor.

7. *Áfáq 'anbar bár shud. Imkán pur az anvár shud.
Bas khuftih-há bídár shud. Ta'bí-r-i-ruyá' ámadih.*

Covered with amber, the world. Illumined by lights, the universe.

Sleepers wake up. The vision is fulfilled.

8. *'Ishq-i-Khudá khúnríz shud. 'Álam sharar angíz shud.
Jám-i-'aṭá labríz shud, chún dawr-i-ṣahbá ámadih.*

It is the season of wine: the love of God sheddeth blood,

The world sprayeth sparks, the cup of favor
overfloweth. (*Provisional translation by the authors*)

The metrics of this eight couplet poem is classical, almost a *ghazal*. Its rhyme is -á, its *radíf* is *ámadih*, which means “has come.” Its expressivity is the result of a number of classical topoi: Moses and the Sinai, and His glowing forehead; the beautiful face of the Beloved; the blowing breeze which wafts a scent of amber; the billowing Ocean of Truth; the call “I am God,” which only the inner ear perceives; the bountiful cloud; the glowing light; the waking up sleepers; the season of wine; the cruelty of love.

Depth and loftiness of meanings

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says very clearly what He means as depth and loftiness of meanings. When He praises a poem for its meaning, it is because that poem is “*like the melody of the birds of holiness in the paradise of El-Abha*” [TAB 1:57], “*a spiritual anthem and a melody of the love of God*” [TAB 1:59], because it

utters “*the praise of ... [the] Lord and ... [expresses] significant meanings in eulogy of ... [the] Lord, the Merciful, the Clement*” [TAB 1:58], and because its “*theme, [is] the Manifest Light*” [TAB 3:546].

Beside exalting the Day of God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses His verses to call on the lovers to rise above their human limitations; to be willing to sacrifice their lives; to announce the glad-tiding; to serve their fellow-men. In His poem *Ay murdiy-i-bi-ján-u-dil* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 13:206] He repeats three urgent calls to His readers: “rise, rise (*jándár shú, jándár shú*)” [verse 1], “wake up, wake up (*bídar shú, bídar shú*)” [verse 2], and “bestir thyself, bestir thyself (*húshyár shú, húshyár shú*)” [verse 3]. In His poem *Dast-i-karam bi-gushá* [*Majmú‘iy-i-Munáját* 18-9] He repeats six times, “Wake up, wake up (*bídar shú, bídar shú*)”, almost a modern *radíf*. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call is especially evident in the following poem [*Majmú‘iy-i-Makátib* 13:203-4], written “one year after the Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh” [SWAB 270, sec. 218]:

1. *Sham ‘-i-shabistán-i-ḥaqq, núr bi-áfáq bakhsh.*
Muqtabis az shams shú, shu‘lih-u ishráq bakhsh.

O torch in the divine chapel, illumine the world.

Take light from the sun and spread out luster and flames.

2. *Sharq munavvar numá ḡharb mu‘aṭṭar numá,*
Rúḥ bi-ṣiqhláb diḥ núr bi-afláq bakhsh.

In the Orient scatter perfumes, and shed splendours on the West.

Carry light unto the Bulgar, and the Slav with life invest. [SWAB 270, sec. 218]

3. *Jism-i-‘alíl-jahán khastih shudih ná-tuván*
Marham-i-har zakhm shú. Dárúy-i-diryáq bakhsh.

The afflicted body of the world is exhausted and spent.

Be a balm for each wound. Offer the infallible remedy.

4. *Fitniy-i-‘álam ma-jú. Dar rah-i-‘ádam ma-pú.*

Khálí az ín guftgú. Núr bi-akhláq bakhsh.

Don't follow the mischiefs of the world. Don't tread the ways of the humans.

Get rid of any dispute. Have a luminous temper.

5. *Gáh chú barq-i-siḥáb, gáh chú abr-i-bahár,*

Khándih bi-lab-há bi-dih, giryih bi-áfáq bakhsh.

As a flashing thunderbolt, bring smiles to the lips.

Like a vernal cloud, give tears of joy to the world.

6. *Yúsif-i-Kan‘án-i-man, Miṣr-i-maláḥat khush ast.*

Jilvih bi-bázár kun. Bahrih bi-aḥdāq bakhsh.

O my Canaanite Joseph, the Egypt of beauty is sweet.

Show up in the bazars. Bring mirth to the eyes.

7. *Fayḍ-i-Bahá’í siráj. ‘Awn-i-Bahá’í zujáj.*

Khák-i-dar-ash bar tú táj. Muzḥdih bi mushtáq bakhsh.

The grace of Bahá is a beacon. The aid of Bahá is a globe.

Let your crown be the dust on His threshold. To the yearning hearts announce the god-spell.

8. *Ján bi-chunín Dil-barí áfat-i-ins-u parí,*

Gar bi-dahí. Bar parí. Furṣat-i-‘ushsháq bakhsh.

To this handsome Sweetheart, a calamity for angels and men,

Offer your soul. Take your flight. To each lover proffer a chance.

9. *Bul-bul-i-gúyá byá! Naghmih bi-gulshan sará!*
Şíhîh bi-zan yá Bahá! Rajfih bi-aṭbâq bakhsh!

O ye chirping nightingale! Come! Sing to the rose-bush!
 Raise the cry, “O Bahá!” Shake the depths of the world!
 [Provisional translation by the authors]

The purposes of poetry

As to the purposes of poetry, Bahá’u’lláh Himself wrote a ‘Tablet to a Poet’ from which we may infer some of them:

Blessed the poet who hath been filled with the spirit of the Day of God and from whose words hath wafted the sweet-smelling savour of the love of his Lord, the All-Merciful, over all created things. Such a one is, in truth, among the blissful. Woe betide the poet who hath drawn spears of sarcasm toward people and turned away from this wondrous Remembrance. Keep in mind the grace of God for having made your tongues the keys to His treasures and the revealers of His wisdom and mysteries. Walk ye in the fear of God and be not of the heedless. This is the day to celebrate His praise, the day in which the Creator of the heavens hath appeared with the kingdom of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised.

[qtd. in Rafati, *Yādnāmih* 296, personal translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami]³

Four main objectives are specified in this short Tablet: being “filled with the spirit of the Day of God”; wafting “the sweet-smelling savour of the love of ... (one’s) Lord, the All-Merciful, over all created things”; unlocking “treasures” and revealing “wisdom and mysteries”; and celebrating “His praise.” No “spears of sarcasm” seem in this day acceptable from poets.

Similar objectives of poetry can also be inferred from words written or uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. As has been said, ‘Abdu’l-

Bahá encouraged a number of poets to write poems so that they may be “*like the melody of the birds of holiness in the paradise of El-Abha*” [TAB 1:57], “*the cause of the gladness of their hearers*” [Tablet to Mr. Edgar Waite, “Recent Tablets” 318], and of the delight of “*the ears of the children of the Kingdom*” [Tablet to Mrs. Sháhnaz Waite, “Tablets to Baháís” 276], or so that their beauty may “affect the minds and impress the hearts of those who listen,” and their listeners may “*find rest and joy and become in tune with the love of God*” [TAB 1:59], and “*through reading it the breast of the believers may be refreshed and dilated with joy*” [TAB 3:669]. Commotion, a feeling of rest and sweetness, the “*tune with the love of God*” and the joy aroused by its beauty are thus some of the feelings which poetry should raise in the hearts of its readers. And, it is well known, “*Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness*” [PT 110, sec. 35, para. 2]. This is one of the reasons why, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reportedly said, “*poetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition!*” [qtd. in Lucas 12], and, as Shoghi Effendi pointed out in a letter written on his behalf to an individual on 10 October 1932, “art [comprising poetry] can better awaken ... nobler sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people” [qtd. in CC3:28, no.52]. If these vital prerequisites are met, then a poem will accomplish its purpose, that is a specific aspect of the general purpose of words described by Bahá’u’lláh in His Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat, exerting an “*influence*” [TB 143]. In this specific case the purpose is to inspire love for God and, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote in His Tablet to Mr. James Simpson, “*to render a distinguished service to the divine Kingdom and to be the cause of the promulgation of the oneness of mankind*” [“Tablets received” 166]. And thus ‘Abdu’l-Bahá seems to confirm the following words by the Latin poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 BC–8 BC), known in the English-speaking world as Horace: “*Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, / lectorem delectando pariterque monendo*” (*Ars*

Poetica 343-344), the one who mixes the useful with the pleasing carries every vote, both teaching and delighting his readers.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not exclude however that poetry may aim at material goals and be equally excellent. But to this kind of poetry He ascribes a lesser importance. He wrote in this regard to Louise R. Waite:

How many poets have come to this world who have written elegies and eulogies in the utmost of eloquence and excellence, but because the meanings were the realities of the world of nature, the effect was produced in the material world and the material world is limited, hence the effects of those meanings are limited. But thou art a composer of poetry which touches Divine Realities and Significances, therefore they are of the mysteries of the Kingdom and the meanings of the Kingdom are unlimited. The poetry of the renowned is perused in the material meetings, but thy poetry will forever be read in the Spiritual Meetings. [qtd. in Hatch 662]

As to the purpose of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá poems, the authors feel that they are quite different in this regard from those of Bahá’u’lláh. We could suppose that Bahá’u’lláh also wrote His poems because He intended to leave to posterity a small window opened on the depth of His human emotions. His intimist verses, that is, His verses that deal “chiefly with intimate and private especially psychological experiences” [Webster 1184], are many indeed. Some of His verses reinforce in us the impression that He really wanted to show glimmers of His hidden human thoughts. This feature makes those compositions especially precious for all people who are eager to become more familiar with the Figure of Bahá’u’lláh and with the human aspects of a Personage Who is known especially through Works that He wrote with the majesty and the authority of the “divine teacher” [SAQ 12, sec.3, para.15].⁴ This

aspect seems totally absent in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s poem. The poet is mostly absent in these verses, except for proclaiming His love for the Beloved, His submission to Him, His utter dependence on Him. It seems that His main purposes are glorifying Bahá’u’lláh, announcing His Revelation, calling people to surrender to and to abide by His will. In this vein He describes Himself as a “nightingale (*bul-bul*)” [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátib* 55:132, verse 3], “astonished and confounded (*madhúsh-u sar-gardán*)” [ibid. verse 4], drunken “with the cheek of the Beloved (*rukḥ-i-Jánán*)” [ibid.], uttering “groans and moans (*Pur áh-u pur afghán shudih*)” [ibid. 5], and raising a plea unto God. But this prayer is offered in the name of all human beings, that He may assist them to find their life in Him [see ibid. verse 12]. Intimist verses may be found in *Ay Khudáy-i-Pur-‘Aṭáy-i-Dhu’l-Manán* [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátib* 13:208] and *Ay Gul-rukḥ-i-Abhá-y-i-man!* [*Majmú’iy-i-Makátib* 55:340-2]. But in these poems as well, the narrating subject that comes on the forefront in the first verses becomes merged into the selves of all human beings, as early as after verse 2 and verse 3, respectively.

Conclusion

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings and utterance, as well as His few poems, can be an important source of inspiration for anyone who wants either to write poems or to obtain a deeper understanding of the poetic language. Hopefully in a not distant future talented pens will come out, who will offer skillful translations of these writings, utterances, and especially poems by the blessed Pen of the Master.

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NOTES

¹ These words appear in “Waite-Harrison Notes; Acca, October 12, 1909.”

² An early American Bahá'í, author of the book entitled *The Two Paths* (Chicago: A.C. Clark, 1897).

³ We thank professor Omid Ghaemmaghami for having given his permission to the publication of this translation.

⁴ For a deeper analysis of this issue see Julio Savi, “Bahá'u'lláh's Persian Poems Written Before 1863,” in *Lights of 'Irfán* 13 (2012), pp. 317-361.

Appendices

Bibliography of the Bahá'í Writings and Their Abbreviations used in this book

ABL	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>'Abdu'l-Bahá in London</i>
ADJ	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Advent of Divine Justice</i>
ADP	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy</i>
BA	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Bahá'í Administration</i>
BK	Compilation, <i>Bahíyyih Khánum</i>
BP	Compilation, <i>Bahá'í Prayers</i>
BS	Compilation, <i>Bahá'í Scriptures</i>
BWF	Compilation, <i>Bahá'í World Faith</i>
CC1-2	<i>Compilation of Compilations</i> , volumes 1 and 2
CF	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Citadel of Faith</i>
DG	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Directives from the Guardian</i>
ESW	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Epistle to the Son of the Wolf</i>
FWU	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Foundations of World Unity</i>
GDM	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Gems of Divine Mysteries</i>
GPB	Shoghi Effendi, <i>God Passes By</i>
GWB	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
HW	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Hidden Words</i>
JWTA	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Japan Will Turn Ablaze</i>
KA	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
KI	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Kitáb-i-Íqán</i>
LG	Compilation, <i>Lights of Guidance</i>
MBW	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957</i>
MOTC	Compilation, <i>Ministry of the Custodians</i>

MUHJ63	<i>Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986</i>
MUJH68	<i>Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1968-1973</i>
PB	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
PDC	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Promised Day is Come</i>
PM	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Prayers and Meditations</i>
PT	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Paris Talks</i>
PUP	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Promulgation of Universal Peace</i>
SAQ	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Some Answered Questions</i>
SDC	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Secret of Divine Civilization</i>
SLH	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Summons of the Lord of Hosts</i>
SVFV	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys</i>
SWAB	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá</i>
SWB	The Báb, <i>Selections from the Writings of The Báb</i>
TAB1-3	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Abbas</i> , volumes 1-3
TAF	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Tablet to Auguste Forel</i>
TB	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
TDH	Shoghi Effendi, <i>This Decisive Hour</i>
TDP	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Tablets of the Divine Plan</i>
TU	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Tabernacle of Unity</i>
UD	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Unfolding Destiny</i>
WOB	Shoghi Effendi, <i>World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters</i>
WT	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Will and Testament</i>

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Cyrus Alai

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Material Civilization to Spiritual Civilization
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Zaid Lundberg

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the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh
Moojan Momen

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Revelation
William Ridgers

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Julio Savi

The Concept of Sacred Justice in Hebrew Eschatology
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Some Chronological Issues in the Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat of Bahá’u’lláh
Peter Terry

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Mohamad Ghasem Bayat

The Firm Cord of Servitude

Theo Cope

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Y.A. Ioannesyan

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LeRoy Jones

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Franklin D. Lewis

The Tablet of Unity (Lawḥ-i-Ittiḥád): A Provisional Translation

Moojan Momen

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Todd Lawson

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

Zaid Lundberg

The Wronged One: Shí'í Narrative Structure in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet
of Visitation for Mullá Ḥusayn

William McCants

The Mystical Dimensions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order

Kavian Milani

Mysticism and the Bahá'í Community

Moojan Momen

The Lawḥ-i-Mánikjī Šāḥib: intro and provisional translation

Ramin Neshati

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Robert Sarracino

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Oliver Scharbrodt

Mysticism in African Traditional Religion and in the Bahá'í Faith:
Classification of Concepts and Practices

Enoch Tanyi

An Exposition on the Fire Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh

James Thomas

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Jianping Wang

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An Epistle of Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad 'the Báb' to Sultan 'Abdulmecid
Necati Alkan

"Thee" and "thee" in the translation of the Súrih of the Temple
(Súriy-i-Haykal)

Khazeh Fananapazir

The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings

Ian Kluge

The Call into Being: Introduction to a Bahá'í Existentialism

Ian Kluge

The Tablet to Hardegg (Lawḥ-i-Hirtík): A Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh to the
Templer Leader Georg David Hardegg

Stephen Lambden

The Tablet of the Bell (Lawḥ-i-Náqúsi) of Bahá'u'lláh

Stephen Lambden

The 'Akká Traditions in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

Moojan Momen

The Tablet of Maqsúd (Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd): Guidance on Human Nature
and Leadership
Ramin Neshati

Inmates of the Celestial Pavilion
Research department of the Bahá'í World Centre

Letters of the Quranic Dispensation
Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre

The Uses of Genealogy and Genealogical Information in Select
Persianate and Bábí/Bahá'í Sources: A Preliminary Survey
Sholeh A. Quinn

An Exposition of the Tablet of the World (Lawḥ-i-Dunya)
James B. Thomas

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Muḥammad Afnán

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Maryam Afshar

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of Ibn-i Asdaq's household
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Textual Resurrection: Book, Imám, and Cosmos in the Qur'án
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Vahid Brown

Chronicles of a Birth: Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í
Religions in Spain (1850-1853)
Amín E. Egea

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the Basic Concepts of Teilhard de Chardin
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Stephen Lambden

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Sholeh A. Quinn

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Roger Prentice
- Interpretation and the Guardianship
Ian Semple
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James B. Thomas
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Religions in Spain (1854-1876)

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on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths: Primary and Other Sources

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Origins of the Bahá'í Concept of Unity and Causality: A Brief Survey
of Greek, Neoplatonic, and Islamic Underpinnings

B.R. Khadem

Lawḥ-i-Hikmat, Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom: Towards a
Progressive Bahá'í Theology

Wolfgang A. Klebel

Further Explorations in Bahá'í Ontology

Ian Kluge

"The newly born Babe of that Day": Mysticism in the Age of the
Maturity of Humankind

Julio Savi

Religion and Exclusivism: a Bahá'í Perspective

Julio Savi

Seeds of Revelation and the Mystic Bond between The Báb and
Bahá'u'lláh: Excerpts from the Persian Bayán

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1863)

Ramsey Zeine

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Religions in Spain (1873-1895)

Amín E. Egea, translated by Francisco J. Díaz

Baron Rosen's Archive Collection of Bábí and Bahá'í Materials

Youli Ioannesyan

Mysticism East and West

Farhang Jahanpour

The Word is the Master Key for the Whole World: The "Teaching and
Spirit of the Cause" in Dialogical and Personal Thinking

Wolfgang A. Klebel

Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings: An Ontological Rapprochement
Ian Kluge

Why the Bahá'í Faith Is Not Pluralist
Grant S. Martin

The Art of Rhetoric in the Writings of Shoghi Effendi
Jack McLean

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet on the Functioning of the Universal House of
Justice: A Provisional Translation and Commentary
Moojan Momen

The Bahá'í Covenant
Alí Nakhjavani

Minimalism from a Bahá'í Perspective
Mahyad Zaerpoor Rahnamaie

Lawḥ-i-Maryam (Tablet to Maryam) Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh: A
Provisional Translation and Commentary
Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani Mazzoli

The Emergence of World Civilization: An Exposition on Excerpts
from the Writings of Shoghi Effendi
James B. Thomas

Designation of Mírzá Yahyá Azal in the Writings of the Báb: Will
and Testament of the Báb; Memorandum from the Research
Department; Making the Crooked Straight

Letters Written on Behalf of the Guardian
Daniel's Prophecies

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Emergence, Enchantment, Entanglement and Excellence of the
Cosmos
Wolfgang Klebel

Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Sublime Vision"
Wolfgang Klebel

Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings Part One
Ian Kluge

Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings Part Two
Ian Kluge

Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings
Ian Kluge

Shoghi Effendi's The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh: A Theology of the
Word

Jack McLean

Insider and Outsider Scholarship in Bahá'í Studies

Moojan Momen

The Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace

‘Alí Nakhjavani

The Súrat al-mulk and the Súrat al-mulúk: A Preliminary Comparison

Sholeh A. Quinn

Prophets and Mountains

Moshe Sharon

Prayers and rituals in the Bahá'í Faith: A Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar fí Ardi'l-Álif

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar fí ardi'l-álif

trans. Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice

Ian Semple

The Rise of Justice in the Spiritual and Secular Life of Man: An

Exposition on excerpts from The Advent of Divine Justice

James B. Thomas

The Resurrection and Return of Jesus

Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith

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Further Comments on a Passage of the Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat

Amín Egea

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The ‘Irfán Colloquium aims at promoting and supporting systematic studies of fundamental principles of the Bahá’í beliefs, the Writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá’í Faith, the interface of the Bahá’í Faith with intellectual schools of thought and religious traditions, and looking at current challenges in human society from the Bahá’í perspective. *‘Irfán* is a Persian word referring to mystical, theological and spiritual knowledge. The ‘Irfán Colloquium and its publications are sponsored by Haj Mehdi Memorial Fund and supported by Nadia Saadat Memorial Scholarships grant.

The Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund was established by Houshang Arjmand (1930–2015) in 1992 to honor his grandfather, Haj Mehdi Arjmand, and is dedicated to promoting the scholarly study of the Bahá’í Faith. Haj Mehdi Arjmand (1861–1941) was a Persian scholar and teacher of the Bahá’í Faith who became well known in Iran for his profound knowledge of the Bible, Qur’an, and Bahá’í scriptures. The primary activity of the Fund is sponsoring annual sessions of ‘Irfán Colloquium and ‘Irfán publications.

In 2012, benefiting from the guidance received from the Universal House of Justice, a management board was appointed for this fund to function as a Bahá’í agency under the direction of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. Organizing and holding ‘Irfán Colloquia started in 1993 and are presently held seven times every year in North America and Western Europe in English, Persian and German languages under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the host country.

As of June 2017 one hundred and forty-four sessions of colloquia have been held. Papers in English presented or received at the ‘Irfán Colloquia are annually published in a series of volumes of the *Lights of ‘Irfán*.