

# LIGHTS OF 'IRFÁN



Papers Presented at the 'Irfán  
Colloquia and Seminars

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Book Nineteen

# Lights of ‘Irfán

Studies in the Principal Bahá’í Beliefs

*Papers Presented at the  
‘Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*



Book Nineteen



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*O My brother! Sanctify thy heart, illumine thy soul, and sharpen thy sight, that thou mayest perceive the sweet accents of the Birds of Heaven and the melodies of the Doves of Holiness warbling in the Kingdom of eternity, and perchance apprehend the inner meaning of these utterances and their hidden mysteries. For otherwise, wert thou to interpret these words according to their outward meaning, thou couldst never prove the truth of the Cause of Him Who came after Jesus, nor silence the opponents, nor prevail over the contending disbelievers.*

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, ¶23

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## Preface

The year 2017 was the start of three years designated for the bicentennial celebration of the twin birthdays of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. 'Irfán Colloquium is participating in this celebratory affairs by inviting scholarly research and presentations on topics related to the appearance, mission and revealed words of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. This volume of the *Lights of Irfan* contains some of those studies such as “The Countenance of Bahá'u'lláh in the Mirror of Mawlúd Tablets”, “Bahá'u'lláh's Life and Mission: This is the One Who Hath Glorified the Son,” and “A new Jewish Document on the Mission of Baha'u'llah.”

The concept of freedom, as presented and defined in the Bahá'í Writings, is extensively explored in the article on “Freedom and the Bahá'í Writings” and some of the aspects of freedom are dealt with in the article on “Power and the Bahá'í community.”

“Power and the Bahá'í community” is an attempt at exploring the dynamic nature of the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh in recreating society. It examines two inter-related problems facing society: first the fact that a large proportion of people are practically excluded from, or are unable to fully participate in, society, and second, the balance between individual freedom and central authority has not been satisfactorily resolved.

Study of *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude), is emphatically recommended by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Some important concepts elucidated in that blessed text are dealt with in the article on “The Kitáb-i-Íqán Revolutionizing the Concepts of Religion, Eschatology and Theology.”

The unity of humankind is the pivotal mission of the Bahá'í Faith. The economic consequences of unity are discussed in the article “An Analytical Perspective of Economic Consequences of Unity.”

“Laozi, a Lost Prophet? The Challenge of the Dao De Jing for the Bahá'í Universe of Discourse” opens a new field in the Bahá'í studies, i.e. comparative studies of Bahá'í teachings and belief systems and various religious traditions prevalent in the eastern Asian countries, particularly Daoism. Articles on such studies will be welcome for publication in the *Lights of 'Irfán*.

“The End of Days” presents a brief review of the question of expectation in religions prior to the advent of Bahá’u’lláh, namely the end of current history and the start of messianic times, when a divinely inspired, and guided holy leader will come to the world to initiate an eternal era of bliss, has occupied humanity to this very day. It finally deals with the content of an antique manuscript in Hebrew, Judeo Arabic and Aramaic written by a Jewish Bahá’í dedicated to proving the divinity of Bahá’u’lláh.

The section on translation contains a provisional translation of a Tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh that includes some ancient Persian poems. It examines the importance of poetry in the history of Bahá’í Faith and in the Bahá’í Writings.

This section also includes provisional translation of some of the poems composed by Rúḥu’lláh Varqá, a very young Bahá’í poet who was martyred together with his father, a well-known Bahá’í poet and Hand of the Cause of God, ‘Alí Muḥammad Varqá, as well as a very brief biographical sketch of Rúḥu’lláh Varqá.

The section on Elucidations includes a compilation of the Writings related to the law of fasting in the form of classified topical summaries. It facilitates having a complete view of various aspects of fasting. This section also contains the recent guidance of the Universal House of Justice on the translation of Arabic verses.

During the recent months, ‘Irfán Colloquium and ‘Irfán publications lost two valuable colleagues, Dr. Muhammad Afnan and Dr. Heshmat Shariary, whose research and studies greatly enriched the quality of ‘Irfán publications. Their short biographies are published in the section on In Memoriam.

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 ‘Irfán Colloquium. It is hoped that such supports and also the collaboration of scholars would make it possible to continue ‘Irfán project and services.



# **Some Reflections on the Principle of Unity/Oneness**

Hooshmand Badee

## **Introduction**

The year 2017 is an exciting time for Bahá'ís because the Bahá'í world community is celebrating the global commemoration of the Bicentennial Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. There are two main reasons for celebration. Bahá'u'lláh is the latest representative of God for reconnecting the humanity to an unknowable God, and this need to be celebrated. Also, the message of Bahá'u'lláh is to unite the entire humanity, a vision prophesied by preceding dispensations, and this is worthy of celebration. Bahá'u'lláh's mission is to create a global society that is based on unity and love rather than factors such as economic and political gains. Bahá'u'lláh is the prophet of unity and a gift of God to the humanity, which should be welcomed. Humanity, according to the Universal House of Justice should, '...seize this opportunity to find out who He was and what He represents.'<sup>1</sup> This paper, briefly, reflects on the message of Bahá'u'lláh, creating the oneness of humanity.

## **Creating Unity/Oneness is the Main Reason for the Coming of Bahá'u'lláh**

Oneness is such an important principle that we can call the Bahá'í Faith a religion of oneness. Oneness, according to the Universal House of Justice is '...at once the operating principle and the

ultimate goal of His [Bahá'u'lláh] Revelation...'<sup>2</sup> According to Bahá'u'lláh's admonitions:

*We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. [HW Ar. #68]*

The principle of oneness according to Shoghi Effendi is '...the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve.' [WOB 42] He further states:

*The principle of the oneness of mankind ... is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope... The principle of the oneness of mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it. [WOB 42]*

The Universal House of Justice in *The Promise of World Peace* confirms that:

World order can be founded only on an unshakable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth which all the human sciences confirm... Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind.<sup>3</sup>

These and numerous other writings about the consciousness of the oneness indicates that its promotion is the object of life for every Bahá'í. Likewise, as the Universal House of Justice puts, humanity should seize the opportunity and find out who is Bahá'u'lláh and what is His message.

Although the term oneness is used frequently in the Bahá'í writings and we are familiar with the term, it is not easy to define, because in order to define it we have to consider several parts of it, and once we break it into several parts, according to Bahá'í scholar Alimorad Davoodi, it is no more oneness. Therefore, the only definition about oneness according to him is that it is ONE<sup>4</sup>, and this is the definition written in most popular dictionaries.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining this view, Davoodi states, 'Although the word oneness cannot be defined we can sense it.'<sup>6</sup> As Bahá'ís we are used to the concept of oneness, we are associated with the spirit of it and we can have a sense of it. If we ask any Bahá'í, anywhere in the world about the main goal of the Bahá'í Faith, the answer in most cases and perhaps all the time would be just one word: unity/oneness.

To Bahá'ís, the principle of unity is the distinguishing characteristic of an approach to an ideal global society. Bahá'u'lláh's statement that '*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens*' [GWB 248], or '*The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers*' [GWB 218], are clearly in line with the recognition of the entire world as one community. This goal is possible because, at this time, the means to attain unity are to hand. For example, the revolutionary and world-embracing means of global interrelatedness such as communication, transportation, information technology and global financial interdependency are available as methods of unifying the nations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that '*In cycles gone by, though harmony was established, yet, owing to the absence of means, the unity of mankind could not have been achieved*' [JWAB 31]. This is because means of coming into contact, which is currently available, were not within reach during the past dispensation, thus, '*... association and interchange of thought were well-nigh impossible*' [JWAB 31]. With reference to these passages, we can list three features of an ideal global society: oneness, association, and interchange of thoughts, which could be understood, appreciated and promoted through advanced information and technology.

On a more encouraging and promising condition, humanity has realised the need for having unity of people and nations. In other words, the concept has been recognized. The fact that we are having so many international conferences organized by the United Nations and governments, to discuss issues related to the humanity, is because

we have understood that it is not possible to live in isolation. We are dependent on each other. It is realized that we are living in an age that oneness of mankind is not an option, it is a necessary condition for survival. A significant subject pertinent to unity/oneness that has been discussed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the interdependence of people and nations. Frequently He emphasises that *‘all the members of the human family, whether peoples or governments, cities or villages, have become increasingly interdependent’* [SWAB 31-32]. And in a stronger statement He said, *‘For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day’* [SWAB 32]. Although, the need for having unity is recognized, humanity is struggling to form an ideal and meaningful society on the foundation of love and unity.

The two words of unity and oneness, although are used interchangeably in many cases, they are not the same. For example, in the following passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states the means for achieving the world of oneness:

*Now is the time for the lovers of God to raise high the banners of unity, to intone, in the assemblages of the world, the verses of friendship and love and to demonstrate to all that the grace of God is one. Thus, will the tabernacles of holiness be upraised on the summits of the earth, gathering all peoples into the protective shadow of the World of Oneness.*  
[SWAB 20]

Shoghi Effendi stated:

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, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life. [WOB 163-164]

In the following section a contrast is made between unity and oneness.

Unity can be achieved through various processes, for example, decision making through a process of a democratic and consultative method. Oneness, on the other hand, is the product or the outcome of such unity. Also, in unity, people gather together for a common interest such as discussing environmental issues, or issues related to refugee's crisis, or elimination of poverty. These events and activities are processes of integration that if done properly and sincerely leads to unity of thoughts and strengthening oneness of humanity.

One might see unity as a temporary connection based on a common interest in a group; oneness is an actual integration of the whole. In other words, the term unity suggests the idea of a group of individuals coming together for a common goal. A group may think alike, however, they are each different in personality and character. Oneness is created when the group integrated with a spirit of love, fellowship and unity. It is in that moment that there is no other identity other than a condition that they are all ONE in spirit.

Unity should be the vision at the start of any activity, with the aim to finish it with oneness. This is a big challenge as many activities with good intention result in failure. The absence of clear planning, lack of resources including human, physical and financial are some of the challenges that may exist in strengthening oneness.

Unity is the catalyst, or a bridge to strengthen oneness. Numerous examples are stated in the Bahá'í writings that are the catalyst to achieve oneness. These include an independent investigation of truth; equality of women and men; an auxiliary universal language, universal and compulsory education; Bahá'í marriage, a universal single currency.

Unity is the means that leads to transformation of human relationship and ends with the oneness. Oneness of humankind according to the Universal House of Justice '...holds far-reaching implications for the life of the individual and for the betterment of the world.'<sup>7</sup> Bahá'u'lláh clearly raise a genuine question, '*...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 Manifestation would be apparent'* [KI 240-241].

All events and activities should have sufficient follow-up that gives an opportunity for oneness to develop. For an effective relationship between all participants in a community, morality becomes a key principle for its operation. Interrelationship should allow individual core values to reach and affect the wider society. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*The more this interrelationship is strengthened and expanded, the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity. Indeed, without these vital ties it would be wholly impossible for the world of humanity to attain true felicity and success.*<sup>8</sup>

## Some Examples of Bahá'í Teachings as Catalysts for Strengthening Oneness

### Independent Investigation of Truth

The Religious priesthood is one of the reasons for serious conflicts and disunity among peoples and nations of the world and among different religious denominations. The Founder of the Bahá'í Faith has removed the religious priesthood from the Bahá'í community forever, and the responsibility of the affairs of the Bahá'í community is invested in the Bahá'í administrative order. The absence of religious priesthood suggests that each Bahá'í has the responsibility and attitude of independent investigation of truth. This is a principle that when practised by the followers of all Faiths leads to the realisation that the true spirit of all Faiths is one. The Bahá'í Writings confirm this view, Bahá'u'lláh said:

*...as these Birds of the Celestial Throne [Manifestations of God] are all sent down from the heaven of the Will of God, and as they all arise to proclaim His Irresistible Faith, they, therefore, are regarded as one soul and the same person. For they all drink from the one Cup of the love of God, and all partake of the fruit of the same Tree of Oneness.* [KI 37]

Elsewhere He said, ‘Purge thy sight, therefore, from all earthly limitations, that thou mayest behold them all as the bearers of one Name, the exponents of one Cause, the manifestations of one Self, and the revellers of one Truth...’ [KI 39]. And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that ‘...the oneness of the kingdom of humanity, which is the essence of the teachings of all the Manifestations of God...’ [PUP 11-12].

The vision and central objective of every revelation have been the consciousness of the spirit of oneness and it came in stages of unity as a goal. Confirming this Bahá’u’lláh states, ‘*The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race...*’ [GWB 215]. He also said, ‘*The prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity*’ [GWB 79]. According to historian Joseph Kitagawa (1990) in the *Quest for Human Unity*, ‘...ideas of the oneness of a globally united humanity have a rich and varied history, reaching back to antiquity.’<sup>9</sup> The Holy Scriptures are in agreement about the fundamental principle of oneness. The diversity of religions, however, is due to external condition and the timing of each Revelation. There can be unity in each Faith or within each denomination. But oneness is created when all become *one* under the banner of *one* God and *one* Faith. The messengers of God are different individuals; however, they are *one* in spirit. Bahá’u’lláh said:

*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 attribute, thou hast not erred from the truth. Even as He hath revealed: “No distinction do We make between any of His Messengers!” [Qur’án 2:285] For they, one and all summon the people of the earth to acknowledge the Unity of God, and herald unto them the Kawthar of an infinite grace and bounty. They are all invested with the robe of Prophethood, and honored with the mantle of glory. Thus, hath Muhammad, the Point of the Qur’án, revealed: “I am all the Prophets.” Likewise, He saith: “I am the first Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus.” Similar statements have been made by ‘Alí. Sayings such as this,*

*which indicate the essential unity of those Exponents of Oneness, have also emanated from the Channels of God's immortal utterance, and the Treasuries of the gems of divine knowledge, and have been recorded in the scriptures. These Countenances are the recipients of the Divine Command, and the daysprings of His Revelation. This Revelation is exalted above the veils of plurality and the exigencies of number. Thus, He saith: "Our Cause is but one" [Qur'án 54:50]. Inasmuch as the Cause is one and the same, the Exponents thereof also must needs be one and the same. [KI 37]*

Thus, an outstanding team-work is recorded in the Holy Scriptures with the messengers of God to create and strengthen the oneness of religions and the creation of oneness of the entire humanity in stages with the unity of tribes, of cities, of a nation, and now of the entire human race.

## Non-involvement in Partisan Politics

The Bahá'í writings clearly define religion and politics as two separate spheres of human activity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: *'Religion is concerned with things of the spirit, politics with things of the world. Religion has to work with the world of thought, whilst the field of politics lies with the world of external conditions'* [PT 132]. Bahá'ís get distance from any activities that cause disunity. One such activity is involved in party politics and this is perhaps another main reason for serious conflicts and disunity in a society. Disunity weakens the degree of oneness. Bahá'ís are, therefore, instructed to apply the non-involvement in partisan politics. The Universal House of Justice states:

When Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His Message to the world in the nineteenth century He made it abundantly clear that the first step essential for the peace and progress of mankind was its unification.<sup>10</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the rationale of non-involvement in political activities:



*If a Bahá'í were to insist on his right to support a certain political party he could not deny the same degree of freedom to other believers. This would mean that within the ranks of the Faith, whose primary mission is to unite all men as one great family under God, there would be Bahá'ís opposed to each other. Where, then, would be the example of unity and harmony which the world is seeking?*<sup>11</sup>

The Universal House of Justice in the Ridvan message 2017 states:

Shoghi Effendi warned too against having any share in political controversies, entanglements, and bickerings. “Let them rise above all particularism and partisanship,” he urged on another occasion, “above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world.” These are the inevitable foam and spray cast up as wave after wave convulses a turbulent and divided society.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, Bahá'í understanding is that partisanship can never build unity among all people, and choosing one side or another in the partisan political divisions will only lead to separation, disintegration and disunity, and weaken the oneness. However, if politics, not defining as partisan politics, but defining by its universal way of thinking which is to have programs for the wellbeing and prosperity and happiness of an entire population, then without any exaggeration, Bahá'u'lláh created a universal political enterprise. He created the greatest social-political and spiritual revolution of all times. Bahá'u'lláh is a spiritual revolutionary.

## The Bahá'í Covenant

The covenant is a guarantee for sustainability of unity in the Bahá'í community and a vital means to achieve the end result of oneness. Bahá'ís believe that the distinctive unity of the Bahá'í Faith stems from a promise from God to humanity that assures His continuing guidance after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. The promise is referred to as the covenant (*Ahd va Mithág*). Bahá'u'lláh, in His ‘Will’, the “Book of Covenant” (*Kitáb-i-Ahd*), appointed His son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as his successor and the interpreter of his writings, and

the centre of His covenant. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, also in his “Will and Testament” (*Alváh-i-Vasáyá*) appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as his successor, the interpreter of the scriptures, and the guardian of the Faith. Thus, there is a clear authoritative interpretation of Bahá’í Holy Scriptures. According to this covenant, the Universal House of Justice is the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Faith (the Guardian and the House of Justice were the twin successors of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá). When the Universal House of Justice sends a message, the entire Bahá’í community unitedly receives their loving, affectionate and caring guidance and put it into practice full heartedly. Bahá’ís are, therefore, united because they follow the same scriptures and authority.

The organization of the Bahá’í Faith and its administrative institutions are such that do not allow the creation of sects, branches or denominations. This requires the establishment of a strong relationship between the central figures of the Bahá’í Faith and the believers. The House of Justice describes the Covenant as ‘...an institution which protects the Cause from individuals who, through the assertion of their own wills, would try to force God’s Cause into the paths of their own preference and thus divide the Faithful and subvert the world-wide establishment of divine justice.’<sup>13</sup>

It is through the Bahá’í covenant that a network of local, national and international institutions operates in harmony throughout the world. Considering that the Bahá’ís live in more than one hundred thousand localities worldwide, embracing the culture of unity affects the Bahá’í community directly, and indirectly affects the flow of strengthening oneness.

## **The Institution of Bahá’í Marriage**

Bahá’í marriage is a principle that helps maintain unity between two people with an effect of creating and strengthening the spirit of oneness. Separation of people weakens the oneness and unity adds to the strength of oneness. The Bahá’í writings consider the family as the basic unit of society. Unless this all-important building block is healthy and cohesive, society cannot be healthy and unified. The foundation of a successful and healthy family is the preparation for a union as an essential element of a happy marriage. Bahá’u’lláh said

marriage is ‘...a fortress for well-being and salvation’ [KA note 88]. He, not only permits but also keenly encourages Bahá’ís to marry with people of any belief or cultural, ethnic and racial background, and with no consideration of social class or wealth. Marriage is to ensure not only unity between the couple but also between the two families, and even different communities and cultures, such as in mixed marriages. These are the means and processes of unity that add to end result of oneness. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: ‘...the foundation of the Kingdom of God is based upon harmony and love, oneness, relationship and union, not upon differences, especially between husband and wife.’<sup>14</sup>

Mixed marriages between different cultures, although challenging in some ways, enable individuals and families to learn and respect each other’s cultures, a phenomenon that would have an effect on the strength of oneness. Other positive effects of mixed marriages are the potential to remove national, cultural and religious barriers in the long run and improve communication between the parties. Children raised in such families develop a broader view of the world, with a positive attitude of respect and effective communication with different cultures. Once again, these are the means and the process of achieving oneness.

Within the Bahá’í community, much importance is placed on consolidating the concept of family and its relationship with those outside of the family unit. Moral education and a better understanding of the significance of marriage and family life helps pave the way. Morality is an essential part of the Bahá’í culture, which defines the relationship between an individual and the whole society, and Bahá’í parents and the Bahá’í community endeavour to teach moral values to children. As a result, those values become an intrinsic part of the individual and the life of the society. In a number of places, the Bahá’í Writings use the analogy of family to confirm that human beings are members of a big family. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: ‘...we are all inhabiting one globe of the earth. In reality, we are one family and each one of us is a member of this family. We must all be in the greatest happiness and comfort’ [FWU 41]. As a result of practising the features of a family in the wider society, it becomes a natural and normal way of life to respect and care for

fellow human beings and the creation of a new generation to work towards creating oneness.

## The Institution of the Bahá'í House of Worship

A significant aspect of Bahá'í House of worship is that it is the practical demonstration of the oneness of religions. 'The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as:

*...one of the most vital institutions of the world', weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service. The union of these two is also reflected in the coherence that exists among the community-building features of the particularly the burgeoning of a devotional spirit that finds expression in gatherings for prayer and an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity.*<sup>15</sup>

These Houses of worship are unique places which welcome members of all Faiths 'to reunite' them. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states, 'The oneness of mankind implies the achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth. The indispensability of this coherence is unmistakably illustrated in his ordination of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, the spiritual center of every Bahá'í community' [MA 23-24]. Hence, Bahá'í House of Worship is an ideal place to gather people of all faiths. Apart from the view that Bahá'í House of Worship is a means to celebrate the oneness of religion, these buildings offer humanitarian services to deal with the ills of society. Shoghi Effendi states:

Nothing short of direct and constant interaction between the spiritual forces emanating from this House of Worship centering in the heart of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, and the energies consciously displayed by those who administer its affairs in their service to humanity can possibly provide the necessary agency capable of removing the ills that have so long and so grievously afflicted humanity. [BA 184]

And the Universal House of Justice states:

It was as if the House of Worship, yet unbuilt, was fulfilling the wishes of the Master, expressed on the eve of the ceremony, for every such edifice: 'that humanity might find a place of meeting' and 'that the proclamation of the oneness of mankind shall go forth from its open courts of holiness.'<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the reality, structure and function of Houses of Worship are effective means of adding to the strength of the spirit of all Faiths as one reality.

## The Institution of the Nineteen-Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast is a unique event ordained in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* by Bahá'u'lláh. He counselled His followers to meet once every Bahá'í month with a vision of the fundamental principle of unity that will diffuse the oneness of mankind, although the methods and approaches adopted in each community may vary. Nineteen Day Feast is demonstrating another means for strengthening the principle of oneness. The holding of these gatherings is to bind hearts together. In appreciation of the purpose of this most important Institution of the Cause 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the Feast in these terms: 'This Feast is a bringer of joy. It is the groundwork of agreement and unity. It is the key to affection and fellowship. It diffuseth the oneness of mankind.'<sup>17</sup>

Bahá'ís' work towards community building starts at the local level, as unity starts at the grassroots through individual efforts, concerted community efforts and the institutions of the Faith. At the core of Bahá'í community life is the Nineteen-Day Feast. The Local Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility of organising these gatherings in their own specific area of jurisdiction. The Nineteen-Day Feast is a good example of the close relationship of the individual, the community and the institutions, where all Bahá'ís in the area, regardless of their socio-economic status and educational achievements gather together to worship, discuss the community's progress, and consult about possible ways to build the community. The hope of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is that:

*... the Nineteen Day Feast become the cause of great spiritual solidarity between the friends, that it may bring believers*

*into the bond of unity, and we will then be so united together that love and wisdom will spread from this centre to all parts. This Feast is a divine Feast. It is a Lord's supper. It attracts confirmation of God like a magnet. It is the cause of the enlightenment of hearts.*<sup>18</sup>

The holding of thousands of such Feasts around the world with objectives of 'unity in diversity', is a practical way of learning, practising and creating oneness of humanity.

## **Pioneering and Travel Teaching**

According to Moojan Momen, the term *pioneer* is 'used in Bahá'í literature to designate those who leave their homes to settle in another locality with the intention of spreading the Bahá'í Faith or supporting existing Bahá'í communities.'<sup>19</sup> The purpose of spreading the Bahá'í Faith is to unite communities with a vision of establishing oneness of mankind, and pioneering is another means for achieving it. Many communities are suffering from internal crisis and variety of ethnic and cultural and religious difficulties and crying out for unity. Pioneers can perform an important role to reconnect people together in an atmosphere of love and fellowship. Bahá'í Pioneers, by moving away from their homes and live with people of other cultures, eagerly promoting unity and practising 'unity in diversity'. These are the two important requirements of strengthening oneness. The program of pioneering in the last few decades has not only resulted in promoting the Bahá'í Faith in all corners of the globe but has also been working towards removing prejudices, which may otherwise form obstacles towards promoting oneness. Referring to the important role of pioneers, the Universal House of Justice states, 'There is no doubt that the movement of pioneers remains an indispensable feature of the spiritual enterprise in which the community of the Most Great Name is engaged.'<sup>20</sup> Pioneers and travel teachers show in a very practical sense that it is possible to be united while being different. It is important to note that by moving to different countries, Bahá'í pioneers and travel teachers do not intend to change people's traditions and way of life but learn and respect the culture of the community they live.

## Further Reflections on the Principle of Unity/Oneness

One may argue that unity is only possible within the Bahá'í community because all its adherents believe in the same principles and values. An outsider may wonder whether the principle of unity is actualised globally. The Bahá'í believe is that the Bahá'í teachings assert global unity and not only that of the Bahá'í community. This unity, however, starts from within the Bahá'í community (and from the actions of many like-minded people). The Universal House of Justice, in the *Promise of World Peace*, encourage the people of the world to examine the Bahá'í communities around the world as an example of what a united world would look like in the future.<sup>21</sup> It is, of course, naive to think that unity, whether within the Bahá'í community or in the wider society, will be established without any difficulties or complications. Indeed, the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh provide the outline and the driving force for unity, but painstaking efforts are needed at both individual and community levels to achieve it. The Bahá'í institutions at the local, national and international levels help establish and preserve the unity within the Bahá'í community, and work with individuals, organizations and governments, as appropriate, to promote unity outside of the Bahá'í community as well. At the local level, these are achieved through various community and core activities such as observing Bahá'í Holy Days, children's classes, junior youth and youth activities, devotional gatherings and study circles, encouraging women's participation in social and other activities, and Bahá'í summer and winter schools. As a community-building exercise, the general public is actively invited to participate in these activities and to work together with the Bahá'ís to bring about unity. A sense of belonging to the community generates a willingness in people to accept responsibility to help each other and to commit to the development of the whole community. These collective actions can help diminish difficulties within and outside the Bahá'í community.

On the practical level, Bahá'ís associate with people of all backgrounds in their effort to follow Bahá'u'lláh's exhortations, striving to create a society that is based on unity and love of humanity. The concept of 'unity in diversity' is what the Bahá'í writings advocates as a practical demonstration of unity that will

protect oneness from uniformity. Elaborating on this, William Hatcher and Douglas Martin wrote:

We will arrive at unity, but rather by an increased awareness of and respect for the intrinsic value of each separate culture, and indeed, of each individual. It is not diversity itself, which is deemed the cause of conflict, but rather our immature attitude towards it, our intolerance and prejudice.<sup>22</sup>

To attain unity in diversity, consideration is given by the Bahá'í community to teaching the concept of world citizenship as part of the education of every child.

The core principle of unity can be challenged because currently there are many obstacles for the transformation of consciousness, such as doubts, misconceptions, prejudices, suspicions and narrow self-interest. Such challenges require the society to '... change its attitudes before a solution to social problems can be found.'<sup>23</sup> Although there are challenges, the Bahá'í community is in a dynamic state of transformation with a culture of learning and with confident facing challenges. This approach promotes the positive transformation of individuals and families into a new generation. However, it depends on how the Bahá'í community adjusts itself with the challenges of the larger society they are living in it. The Bahá'í writings provide a number of principles that, taken together with a basic spiritual transformation in society, show the pathway for sustainable living and guide communities towards a more sustainable future. One such belief is an understanding of human nature, which encourages us to re-examine who we are and what our purpose in life is? Universal and compulsory education, elimination of all kinds of prejudices, the harmony of science and religion, and independent investigation of truth, Bahá'í method of decision making through the democratic approach of consultation are some of the spiritual principles strongly suggested in the Bahá'í writings as catalyst and processes of strengthening oneness.

Today the effects of the gradual application of the spirit of unity, such as the rejection of racial prejudices, the greater awareness of the need to protect the environment, the recognition of a need for political unity, migration and refugee crisis has led to recognize positive aspects of human potential, recognizing principles of



spirituality to reduce absolute poverty, the acceptance of gender equality in many societies, and the greater awareness of human rights, are apparent in the wider society. The recognition and application of these measures would gradually strengthen the principle of oneness.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Universal House of Justice. Message of 17 October 2017, to all who celebrate the Glory of God.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid. Message dated 20 October 1983.
- <sup>3</sup> Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, pp. 13-14.
- <sup>4</sup> The word ‘oneness’ translated into English word for ‘one’ is the Greek word, ‘heis’, which means, ‘one.’ It implies being whole or complete. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term ‘one’ as follows: Having the value of one — used to refer to a single person or thing.
- <sup>5</sup> The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines unity as follows: “The state of being in full agreement; a way of combining the parts in a work of art or literature so that they seem to belong together.”
- <sup>6</sup> Alimorad Davoodi.
- <sup>7</sup> Universal House of Justice, letter dated 29 January 2014 to the Bahá’í youth in Iran.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in a Compilation on *Huqúqu’lláh*, p. 22.
- <sup>9</sup> Joseph Kitagawa. Quoted in Stephen Lambden, *Bahá’í and Globalization*, ed., p. 17.
- <sup>10</sup> Universal House of Justice. *Wellspring of Guidance*, pp. 131-136.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1968 — 1973, pp. 44-50.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. Ridván 2017.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. Quoted in *Power of the Covenant*, Part Two, Toronto: Bahá’í Canada Publications 1976, p. 17.
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. A selection of extracts from the Bahá’í writings on family life and marriage, p. 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> Universal House of Justice. Ridván 2012.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of Argentina, 25 July 1984.

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- <sup>18</sup> From a talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá given at a Nineteen Day Feast in London, England, 29 December 1912, quoted in Bahá’í News Letter, 33 (July 1929), pp. 1-2.
- <sup>19</sup> Moojan Momen. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, New York: Columbia University, 2013.
- <sup>20</sup> Universal House of Justice. Message of 23 May 2011.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. *The Promise of World Peace*, part IV: ‘If the Bahá’í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study.’
- <sup>22</sup> William Hatcher and Douglas Martin. *The Bahá’í Faith*, p. 78.
- <sup>23</sup> Universal House of Justice. Statement dated 27 April 1988.

# Bahá'u'lláh's Life and Mission

## “This is the One Who Hath Glorified the Son”

JoAnn Borovicka

### Introduction

In the tablet entitled the Lawh-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Tablet), also known as the Tablet to the Christians, Bahá'u'lláh refers to multiple biblical verses regarding the Return of Christ and unequivocally states that He is the fulfillment of these prophecies. One such prophecy comes from the Gospel of John:

*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. [John 16:12-14]*

In reference to the above verses and in declaration of His Own Mission Bahá'u'lláh states,

*This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: “Ye cannot bear it now.” ... Say, verily, He hath testified of Me, and I do testify of Him. Indeed, He hath purposed no on other than Me.... Verily, He Who is the Spirit of Truth is come to guide you unto all truth. He*

*speaketh not as prompted by His own self, but as bidden by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.* [Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶7, 10]

With clear and straightforward language, Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the Word spoken of by Jesus Christ, to bring that which Christ necessarily concealed in the Christian Revelation, and to be “purposed” by Christ. Furthermore, in a statement that expresses His solidarity with Christ, Bahá'u'lláh states, “*Say, this is the One Who hath glorified the Son and hath exalted His Cause*” [Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶11]. Questions arise, such as: How does Bahá'u'lláh glorify Christ and exalt His Cause? And in what manner should followers of Bahá'u'lláh do the same?

For the purpose of understanding more about this aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's life and mission, this paper will examine three ways in which Bahá'u'lláh glorifies the Son and exalts His Cause, these being that Bahá'u'lláh quotes, explains, and defends Christian scripture; supplements Christ's teachings according to the needs of a fast-evolving society; and speaks of Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality. The duty of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to teach these aspects of Christ's life and mission will be examined.

## Quoting, Explaining, and Defending Christian Scripture

Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause by inextricably linking His Revelation with that of Christ and by confirming New Testament passages and explaining their meanings. For example, in *Gems of Divine Mysteries* Bahá'u'lláh quotes prophecies about a mighty personage represented in fantastic imagery in the Book of Revelation: “*His eyes were as a flame of fire*”, and “*brass-like were His feet*”, and “*out of His mouth goeth a two-edged sword*” [Revelation 1:14-16; 2:18; 19:15]. Bahá'u'lláh states that these verses are obviously not to be interpreted literally, then challenges the reader to reflect on the scripture's inner meanings. Those verses are, He states, “*of such surpassing eloquence and clarity as to mark the loftiest heights of utterance and the epitome of wisdom*” [GDM ¶72]. Bahá'u'lláh then proceeds to explain, in a seven-paragraph commentary, the truths hidden within those verses. Through His

explanation we learn that the imagery refers to the qualities, powers, and circumstances of the Promised One.

Additional examples in which Bahá'u'lláh as well as the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá embrace biblical Scripture and explain its meanings, can be found throughout the Bahá'í Writings.<sup>1</sup> Although in today's world there is much cynicism about biblical scripture,<sup>2</sup> the Bahá'í Writings show absolute respect for both the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. Referring to the Book of the Revelation, widely acknowledged to be one of the most challenging books of the Christian Testament in terms of its seemingly "baffling and impenetrable" imagery,<sup>3</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphatically states, "*This is the truth and what truth can be greater than that announced by the Revelation of St. John the Divine?*" [SWAB no. 3.2]

In addition to glorifying Christ and exalting His Cause by explaining verses from the Christian Testament, the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith often quote Christian scriptures solely to draw on the spiritual truths that they contain. 'Abdu'l-Bahá includes references to the Christian scriptures in most of His Tablets of the Divine Plan (one of three charters of the Bahá'í Faith), thereby demonstrating that understanding of the Bible is essential to the teaching effort. For example, in His April 8, 1916 Tablet to the United States and Canada, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "*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]. We can speculate that 'Abdu'l-Bahá used that quotation because those to whom He was talking were familiar with that biblical verse — He was speaking to His audience in the language of their religious tradition. In doing so, He also honors the Christian scripture.

Bahá'u'lláh not only quotes and explains Christian scriptures, but also defends the spiritual integrity of these texts against claims that their teachings have been corrupted. He states,

*We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist amongst the Christians .... How grievously they have erred! How oblivious of the fact that such a statement imputeth the gravest injustice and tyranny to a gracious and*

*loving Providence! How could God, when once the Day-star of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people ... cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? .... What law could be their stay and guide? [KI 89]*

In addition to quoting, explaining, and defending the Christian scriptures, Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause as He adopts the literary style of the Christian Beatitudes and continues them in the Lawh-i-Aqdas.<sup>4</sup> The Beatitudes (or Blessings) are found in the gospel verses commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Plain (in Luke 6) and the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 5). These “sermons” summarize many of Christ’s teachings such as the importance of justice, woe to the oppressor, the law of forgiveness, the call for unconditional love, the need for sacrificial service, and the necessity of building one’s life on sound spiritual principles. The delivery is in a distinctive style. The following is an excerpt:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. [Matthew 5:3-5]*

Bahá'u'lláh reveals twenty-one verses in the style of the Beatitudes in His closing passages of the Lawh-i-Aqdas. The following is an excerpt:

*Say: Blessed the slumberer who is awakened by My Breeze.*

*Blessed the lifeless one who is quickened through My reviving breaths.*

*Blessed the eye that is solaced by gazing at My beauty.*

*Blessed the wayfarer who directeth his steps towards the Tabernacle of My glory and majesty. [Lawh-i-Aqdas]*

Bahá'u'lláh’s stylistic embrace and continuation of the Beatitudes honors the Christian Beatitudes and is a literary reminder that

Bahá'u'lláh and Jesus Christ “*are the same Luminaries and the self-same Mysteries*” [GDM ¶44].

Because Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá show reverence for and use biblical scripture in Their teaching, it follows that Bahá’ís should do the same; that is, to reverently quote and explain its verses in light of the Bahá’í Writings, particularly when teaching the Faith to those from a biblical tradition. A question that sometimes arises about this topic revolves around the value of studying or quoting biblical verses when the biblical text lacks the word-for-word authenticity of the Bahá’í Writings. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged by biblical scholars that the New Testament texts were composed by many writers and editors after the Ascension of Christ and that the scriptures may not represent Christ’s exact words.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the biblical text does not have the word-for-word authenticity of the Bahá’í Writings as the revealed Word of God.<sup>6</sup> This knowledge is, of course, essential in placing the biblical scriptures in the context of progressive revelation and in understanding the unique authority of the Bahá’í Writings. It would be important to share this knowledge with wisdom when teaching the Faith. However, it should also be noted that in the hundreds of examples of Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoting or explaining biblical references, there is not one incident (found by this author) in which a biblical verse was referenced along with a disclaimer that the biblical text may not represent the exact words of the Christ, or that a book of the Christian scriptures just quoted may not be completely authentic. On the contrary, the Christian text is referenced in a straightforward manner that honors that text as scripture.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in London, He was invited to write an inscription in a church Bible. He wrote: “*THIS book is the Holy Book of God, of celestial Inspiration. It is the Bible of Salvation, the Noble Gospel. It is the mystery of the Kingdom and its light. It is the Divine Bounty, the sign of the guidance of God*” [ABL 17]. Of course, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá knew the historical circumstances surrounding the biblical texts and the degree to which they could or could not be considered authentic. Yet He wrote of these scriptures and referenced them in such terms as “the Divine Bounty” and “the sign of the guidance of God.” This is the spirit in which Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quote and explain Christian scriptures and it would be

altogether appropriate and, indeed, incumbent upon the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to do the same.

## Christ's Teachings Supplemented

A second way in which Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause is that He supplements Christ's teachings according to the needs of a fast-evolving society. The use of the word "supplements" may come as a surprise to some; however, this word was specifically chosen for this context by Shoghi Effendi. In the following excerpt from *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi states that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation "supplements" the teachings of previous Revelations:

The Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh abrogates unconditionally all the Dispensations gone before it ... [and] supplements their teachings with such laws and ordinances as conform to the imperative needs, and are dictated by the growing receptivity, of a fast evolving and constantly changing society. [GPB 100]

Because the Bahá'í Faith claims to abrogate the social laws and organizational structures that were revealed or that evolved in the previous Dispensations, the "teachings" referred to in the above quotation; that is, those teachings that are supplemented, must be the foundational spiritual teachings of earlier religions. While these spiritual teachings are changeless and eternal, with each succeeding Revelation they are supplemented with teachings for greater understandings and wider applications commensurate with new human capacity. The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause by supplementing Christ's teachings according to the needs of this age.

The inevitable need for the teachings of the Christian Revelation to be supplemented is stated in the Gospel of John. The following verses attributed to Christ indicate that Christ had more to say to His followers but was restricted due to the human capacity of the time:

*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will*



*speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.* [John 16:12-13]

In reference to these verses, Bahá'u'lláh states that His Revelation contains that which Christ had necessarily concealed: *This is the Word which the Son concealed, when to those around Him He said: "Ye cannot bear it now"* [Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶4]. To examine this supplementation dynamic, this section will look at three Christian topics: oneness, salvation, and the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the Epistle to the Galatians (attributed to St. Paul) there is a radical statement concerning the oneness of the followers of Christ: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* [Galatians 3:28]. This verse harmonizes with other teachings in the Christian scriptures, including the entire 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John which is a prayer in which Christ states His oneness with His followers and with God. An excerpt reads: *"And the glory which Thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as We are one"* [John 17:22].

In the Bahá'í Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh supplements Christ's teachings on oneness by clarifying that the oneness of humanity is a truth that holds irrespective of gender, ethnicity, class, or nationality. These points have not always been clear in Christian history, as evidenced by the use of certain Christian scriptures to preach ethnic exclusivity, promote the subjugation of women, and defend slavery.<sup>7</sup> In repeatedly proclaiming the oneness of mankind, Bahá'u'lláh clearly teaches that all *"men and women are equal in the sight of God"* [PUP 174] and deserving of equal resources, education, and opportunity. Bahá'u'lláh is the first Manifestation of God in this Cycle to abolish slavery in writing. He states: *"It is forbidden you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for him who is himself a servant to buy another of God's servants, and this hath been prohibited in His Holy Tablet"* [KA ¶72]. Addressing another aspect of the oneness of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that *mankind is one regardless of religious orientation: "There is perfect brotherhood underlying humanity, for all are servants of one God and belong to one family under the protection of divine providence"* [PUP 129]. He also specifies that humanity's oneness transcends

*geographical and political boundaries: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens”* [GWB CXVII]. Thus, in a multitude of clear and straightforward teachings and laws, Bahá’u’lláh supplements Christ’s teachings regarding the oneness of humanity.

A second way that Bahá’u’lláh supplements Christ’s teachings has to do with the topic of salvation, expanding it from focus on the individual to mankind as a whole. Shoghi Effendi explains:

The Revelation associated with the Faith of Jesus Christ focused attention primarily on the redemption of the individual and the molding of his conduct, and stressed, as its central theme, the necessity of inculcating a high standard of morality and discipline into man, as the fundamental unit in human society. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find any reference to the unity of nations or the unification of mankind as a whole. When Jesus spoke to those around Him, He addressed them primarily as individuals rather than as component parts of one universal, indivisible entity. The whole surface of the earth was as yet unexplored, and the organization of all its peoples and nations as one unit could, consequently, not be envisaged, how much less proclaimed or established. [PDC 119]

Bahá’u’lláh has supplemented Christian teachings by enlarging the concept of salvation to include humanity collectively. He states, *“Verily, He [Jesus] said: ‘Come ye after Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.’ In this day, however, We say: ‘Come ye after Me, that We may make you to become the quickeners of mankind’”* [PDC 119-20]. The Bahá’í Writings teach principles and practices required for the unification, advancement, and salvation of all of the peoples of the world, including the necessity of universal compulsory education, the need for a universal auxiliary language, and the requirement for all of the kings and rulers of the earth to form a tribunal of nations to consult on the best interest of the people of the world [see PB 111-122].

A third example of how Bahá’u’lláh supplements Christ’s teachings has to do with expectations of the Kingdom of God on earth. In the Christian scriptures, the Lord’s Prayer states the assurance that: *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* [Matthew

6:10]. Understandings of this verse have varied widely.<sup>8</sup> The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh supplements this teaching through the principles and practices already mentioned and by introducing the Bahá'í Administrative Order, a unique design for human organization shaped by principles of social justice – an administrative framework upon which spiritual principles and practices can find full human expression and which is inherently protected from the corruption of power. Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order provides for the practical and spiritual realization of Christ's teachings concerning the Kingdom of God on earth. When Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are understood as described by Shoghi Effendi – as supplemental to (not unseating, usurping, or supplanting) the foundational teachings of Christ – the way is eased for productive Bahá'í/Christian dialogue.

Inherent in the recognition that the Bahá'í Faith supplements Christ's teachings is the acknowledgement that the Christian Revelation played an essential part in preparing the way for the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Persian Bayan, the Báb explicitly states that while recognition of the Dayspring of Revelation in each Dispensation is essential to true knowledge, one should praise and show gratitude to former Revelations:

*True knowledge, therefore, is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation. Nor is there any wealth save in poverty in all save God and sanctity from aught else but Him—a state that can be realized only when demonstrated towards Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation. This doth not mean, however, that one ought not to yield praise unto former Revelations. On no account is this acceptable, inasmuch as it behooveth man, upon reaching the age of nineteen, to render thanksgiving for the day of his conception as an embryo. For had the embryo not existed, how could he have reached his present state? Likewise had the religion taught by Adam not existed, this Faith would not have attained its present stage. Thus consider thou the development of God's Faith until the end that hath no end. [PB V, 4; SWB p. 89]*

However one may express the importance of recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, this expression must harmonize with

the Bahá'í mandate to show praise and gratitude for the teachings of Christ (as well as other Manifestations) and to recognize that the Bahá'í teachings are supplemental to Christ's religion.

## Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality

Bahá'u'lláh states, "*This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future*" [KA ¶182]. To what is He referring? In light of the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation, this passage can be understood as referring to the Voice of God expressed through all of the divine Messengers and the spiritual foundation that unites all religions. It follows, then, that from a Bahá'í perspective, it would be correct to say that the foundational teachings of Christ, as well as the spiritual reality of Christ, are eternal and changeless.

At this point, one might wonder how the mission of Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause while at the same time abrogating unconditionally the Dispensation associated with Christianity. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi states, "*The Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh abrogates unconditionally all the Dispensations gone before it*" [GPB 100]. However, further study reveals a qualifying distinction in this regard. Shoghi Effendi explains that while abrogating earlier Dispensations, "*the Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it*" [WOB 57-58]. Dispensations are abrogated, religions are not. In this context "Dispensations" indicate systems of governance and social regulations identified with various Manifestations of God, whereas "religions" indicate the "fundamentals of Their doctrines" [PDC 108]. Shoghi Effendi explains:

The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose 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 57-58]

Bahá'u'lláh uncompromisingly upholds the eternal verities enshrined in the Christian Revelation. Indeed, according to the above passage, one purpose of the Bahá'í Faith is to enable those who identify with the Christian religion to obtain a fuller understanding of the eternal verities taught by Christ and to better grasp His purpose. While the Bahá'í Writings state that the laws and organizational structures associated with Christianity (the Christian Dispensation) have been abrogated, the Writings never speak of the Spirit of Christ as abrogated. The Bahá'í Writings confirm the power and relevance of Christ. For example, in reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Bahá'u'lláh states the blessings of turning toward Christ: *“He it is Who purified the world. Blessed is the man who, with a face beaming with light, hath turned towards Him”* [GWB XXXVI]. The eternal and changeless dimension of Christ is expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this passage from *Some Answered Questions*: *“Prophethood is the station of the heart of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the station of His spirit”* [SAQ 27:8]. From these and many other like passages, it is evident that Christ and Bahá'u'lláh are continuous in their purpose.

Unequivocally and without the least reservation it [the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh] proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, and indispensable in their value to mankind. [WOB 58]

In His talks to audiences in the West (as recorded in *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London, The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, and *Paris Talks*) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s consistently expresses Bahá'í belief in the existing eternal Reality of the Spirit of Christ. Notice how in the following excerpts ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of the spiritual bounty of Christ not as a power abrogated, but as an existing eternal spiritual Reality:

*Christ is ever in the world of existence. He has never disappeared out of it.... Rest assured that Christ is present.*

*The Spiritual beauty we see around us today is from the breathings of Christ. [ABL 41]*

*Although the people possess external eyes, yet the insight of the soul is blind ... and the bounties of His Holiness Christ save souls from these conditions. [PUP 626]*

*We must follow His example. We must emulate the Prophets of God. We must follow Jesus Christ. [PUP 42]*

*... the reality of Christ is an unlimited essence. The infinite and unlimited Reality cannot be bounded by any limitation. [PUP 443]*

*Jesus Christ lived two thousand years ago. Today we behold His manifest signs; His light is shining; His sovereignty is established; His traces are apparent; His bounties are effulgent. [PUP 308]*

*The reality of Christ was always in heaven and will always be. [PUP 245]*

*Jesus Christ established the religion of God through love. His sovereignty is everlasting. [PUP 211]*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Perfect Example, demonstrates that it is correct for Bahá’ís to think and speak of Jesus Christ as “*an unlimited essence*” Whose bounties can “*save souls.*” Indeed, the station of Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality is conveyed in Bahá’u’lláh’s identity as “*Christ returned in the Glory of the Father*” [GPB 230]. Bahá’u’lláh states, “*If ye be intent on crucifying once again Jesus, the Spirit of God, put Me to death, for He hath once more, in My person, been made manifest unto you*” [GWB XLVII]. From this perspective, the entirety of the Bahá’í Revelation is, in a sense, the manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God, the existing eternal spiritual Reality.

## Conclusion

In the above study I have attempted to demonstrate three ways that Bahá'u'lláh glorifies Christ and exalts His Cause, those being that Bahá'u'lláh quotes, explains, and defends Christian scripture; supplements the spiritual teachings of Christ; and refers to Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality. This is not a definitive list, but it is a practical one in that these actions can and, I would propose, should find expression in the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. In the manner of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'ís can quote, explain, and defend Christian scripture; teach how Bahá'u'lláh supplements the spiritual teachings of Christ; and speak of Jesus Christ as an existing eternal spiritual Reality. These are three substantial ways in which Bahá'ís can honor and accurately convey Bahá'u'lláh's Self-proclaimed mission as "This is the One Who hath glorified the Son and hath exalted His Cause" [Lawh-i-Aqdas].

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“Resurrection of Christ” Memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Sept. 14, 1987

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Borovicka, *Light of the Kingdom* for a compilation of Bahá’í teachings on biblical topics.

<sup>2</sup> Byers

<sup>3</sup> Bauckham, p. 1287

<sup>4</sup> See the Lawh-i-Aqdas ¶23

<sup>5</sup> See Borovicka, pp. 191-193.

<sup>6</sup> “The Bahá’ís believe that God’s Revelation is under His care and protection and that the essence, or essential elements, of what His Manifestations intended to convey has been recorded and preserved in Their Holy Books. However, as the sayings of the ancient Prophets were written down some time later, we cannot categorically state, as we do in the case of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, that the words and phrases attributed to Them are Their exact words.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice, dated August 9, 1984, to an individual believer, cited in “Resurrection of Christ” Memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, September 14, 1987)

<sup>7</sup> For studies and commentary on the use of Christian scripture to teach ethnic exclusivity, preach gender superiority, and defend slavery, see Borg, Bristow, Carter, Elliott, Gager.

<sup>8</sup> See Allison, p. 856



# Laozi, A Lost Prophet?

## The Challenge of the *Dao De Jing* for the Bahá'í Universe of Discourse

Roland Faber

### 1. Why Daoism, Laozi and the *Dao De Jing*?

Daoism is one of the oldest religions.<sup>1</sup> Its roots are lost in pre-history. We find it arise amidst the fog of human awakening to historical consciousness when it begins to manifest itself in old mythological and symbolic archetypes of existence and impresses on us patterns of human wisdom and insight into the nature of existence that immediately strike a cord on various levels of human thought and modes of feeling. It grew from a primordial and pre-confessional mode of religion in the form of incarnations of a worldwide religious consciousness of earlier times (although it has never disappeared completely to this day),<sup>2</sup> housed in shamanistic rhythms of living.<sup>3</sup> As a spiritual philosophy it arose and developed (at lest in their effect) preeminently from the genius of one person and the medium of one book<sup>4</sup> to become a well-established worldview and way of life, religion and cultural self-definition, expressive of the Chinese mind and spirit: Meet the legendary sage Laozi and his incomparable book of ancient, yet in its context novel and unexpected wisdom, the *Laozi* or *Dao De Jing*!<sup>5</sup>

As the Bahá'í Faith recognizes all religions and wisdom traditions to be the expression of one divine origin,<sup>6</sup> the acknowledgement of

Daoism, Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* must be of preeminent importance. They demand attention not only for the reconstruction of one of the most influential streams of religious history of humanity<sup>7</sup> – as all religious streams are considered to be flowing into the universal openness of the Bahá’í revelation, which receives them as moments of one history of religious awakening and as past expressions of it own pre-history.<sup>8</sup> What is more, they command to be heard in their own contributions to the future of humanity, as all religions contribute their specific uniqueness to the unity of religions,<sup>9</sup> a unity which in the image of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must be understood as a unification by differentiation, where the manifold highlights the beauty of this confluence.<sup>10</sup>

The coming considerations set out to frame this task in three related facets: First, they want to demonstrate the uniqueness of the contributions of Daoism especially as mediated through Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* to a future universal religious consciousness that the Bahá’í revelation is said to have instigated, although we might not yet be able to see its future contours clearly or at all.<sup>11</sup> Second, they want to explicate resonances with and differences from the Bahá’í universe, less in principles, as both traditions are overwhelmingly compatible,<sup>12</sup> but rather taking the (philosophical and religious) emphases into account that renders Daoism enlightening beyond its historical situatedness because of the genius of Laozi and the *Laozi* and their reception throughout history.<sup>13</sup> Third, such considerations cannot avoid the question whether or not, if such a religion is one of the major expressions of the one source that has also animated Bahá’u’lláh, Daoism should be considered a genuine dispensation of a divine Manifestation; whether or not, then, the *Laozi* must be read as scripture, expressing the one revelation in a unique (historical) body; and whether or not the figure of Laozi and the book of the *Dao De Jing* should be considered a temple (*haykal*) of revelation<sup>14</sup> in the sense that we would accept for the so-called “Big Five” (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism)<sup>15</sup> with the addition of Zoroastrianism, all of which Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi recognized as genuine dispensations under the influence of a Manifestation.<sup>16</sup> In other words, are we with Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* encountering a (lost) prophet and his book?<sup>17</sup>

Why should this be challenging to the Bahá'í universe of discourse?<sup>18</sup> Because compared with the “Big Five” (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and Zoroastrianism, the Bahá'í writings entertain only scant references to other religions,<sup>19</sup> such as “Chinese religions,” and in particular virtually none to Daoism nor Laozi, nor the *Dao De Jing*.<sup>20</sup> This in light of the fact that we *do* find at least several references of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi to China, Chinese religion(s)<sup>21</sup> and especially Confucius, although the exact status of these in the Bahá'í universe is far from definite beyond any doubt either.<sup>22</sup> Yet, since the absence of evidence should not be taken as a sign for the evidence of absence,<sup>23</sup> the fact that the Bahá'í writings know of Confucianism, but emphasizes it as an ethics with Confucius as an ethical reformer (as contrasted with the Buddha as Manifestation and Buddhism as religion)<sup>24</sup> – although there are indications to the contrary<sup>25</sup> – should make us even more inclined to investigate the status of one of the “other” original sources of religion and philosophy, wisdom and life in China, namely, the tacit “presence” of Daoism in the legacy of Laozi and one of its “constitutional” texts,<sup>26</sup> the *Dao De Jing*.<sup>27</sup> After approaching Daoism, Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* historically and philosophically as well as religiously and referencing resonances with the Bahá'í universe of discourse, its principles and worldview, I will reflect on the fascinating and rewarding question regarding the (potential) status of Laozi in the Bahá'í universe of discourse. By connecting the insights gathered, and in light of only scant evidence (but with some arguments from the Bahá'í writings), I will not answer this question definitively, but rather consider several alternatives of how to potentially understand Laozi from a Bahá'í perspective, altogether developing eight alternative views for future consideration.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Defining “Daoism”

We can assume that some of the Daoist texts are very old, predating the organization of a Daoist movement or religion. While we may find estimations that some of these texts in their original form (not the received texts) go back to the Zhou dynasty (1000 B.C.E. – 300 B.C.E.), in any “organized” form “Daoism” appears around the beginning of the second century B.C.E. as an established and distinct philosophy,<sup>29</sup> but as religious identity, Daoism was

probably not organized before the movement of the Celestial Masters in the second century C.E.<sup>30</sup>

In the west, serious attempts of understanding Daoist texts and Daoism as a phenomenon can be dated only to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The *Dao De Jing*, the book traditionally assigned to the ancient sage Laozi, was only translated in the 1860s and the preceding reception of Daoism in the west was littered with prejudices: that it is a primitive wisdom tradition, closer to primordial forms of shamanism than any western concept of religion and even further removed from what could possibly count as philosophy; that it represents an irrational, chaotic, even anarchic approach to reality far removed from the understanding of Confucianism as a “rational” wisdom then prevalent among intellectuals and philosophers in the west receptive to Chinese thought; that it is really a non-philosophy falling under the ban of Plato on poets<sup>31</sup> since they seek imagination instead of truth; and that it seemed to have been too much involved in esoteric Chinese folk practices like alchemy as to be taken seriously.<sup>32</sup>

However, as soon as the philosophical side of Daoism was discovered to be actually of considerable interest in its contrasts to western thought patterns, unfortunately, a new division was introduced. Insofar as we can differentiate between the religion of Daoism (*Dao Jiao*) and its philosophical texts, like the *Dao De Jing* (*Dao Jia*),<sup>33</sup> interests shifted to the excavation of the noble ideas from the crude folk elements salvaging the philosophy from the primitive religion, which to the dismay of the philosophical purist exhibits the belief in ghosts and ancestral ceremonies or alchemical endeavors in the search for physical immortality.<sup>34</sup> Newer research (conscious of such biases) has, however, shown that this is a short-sided approach as both Daoist religion and philosophy are intimately intertwined in the life of the people that followed and still follow their teachings.<sup>35</sup>

Then again, as this integrated gestalt becomes more and more visible today, we are forced to step outside of the western prejudices regarding that which it grants the title of a religion.<sup>36</sup> This is, of course, a reminder that the phenomenon of religion and its wisdom as well as its relationship to philosophical thought and insight are much more complex, intricate and fascinating than the fairly recent western

definitions of religion would seem to suggest and (based on the Greek antagonisms) its presumed opposition to philosophy would allow to be discovered.<sup>37</sup> Since one of the most profound claims of the Bahá'í Faith is the unity of all religions and their divine origin,<sup>38</sup> it is a good exercise in this encounter to probe the Bahá'í universe of discourse as it ventures outside of these pervasive western limitations whereby it may discover a truly different way how religion can be lived and how thought can “strangely” understand the world and its existential grounds, how human beings can practice spiritual existence and for what reason human beings express spiritual and religious aims socially and intellectually.<sup>39</sup>

### 3. Revelation or Wisdom?

Yet another difference becomes quickly visible as long as one tries grasping Daoism from the perspective of Abrahamic experiences and thought patterns: there seems in early Chinese history not to have been any claim (or concept) of revelation of a divinity or of a divine messenger such as that which has structured the mutually related Abrahamic traditions at least from the Hebrew's experience of the exodus from Egypt on.<sup>40</sup> Hence, in her book on *The Chinese Religions and the Bahá'í Faith*, Phyllis Chew leaves us with this profound statement: “Thus, while the Baha'i Faith is established as a revealed religion brought by a prophet-messenger, the Chinese religion is not. The Chinese religion is a unique instance of a religion without revelation, a religion with the sage as a central figure rather than a prophet.”<sup>41</sup> The sage is a holy figure or (like the early Greek seeker of wisdom Pythagoras) a philosopher who teaches a method of life and lives what he teaches,<sup>42</sup> one who is versed in the mysteries of the cosmos and how its rules influence human existence.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, we must also not overlook that Daoism at certain points in its development constructed notions that Bahá'ís understand to be essential to their own identity – in the case of Daoism virtually before any other religion, philosophy or cultural pool of ideas: that the aim of society is the establishment of the Most Great Peace, understood to include the whole of humanity, not just a tribe or specific culture;<sup>44</sup> that the notion of religion is not necessarily a western invention as Daoism viewed itself self-consciously as a religion (although just not in the western sense);<sup>45</sup>

that Daoism developed into a “state religion” — something Shoghi Effendi expected to happen with countries of majority Bahá’í populations;<sup>46</sup> and most interestingly, that Daoism indeed developed into a revealed religion revering scriptures and worshipping holy figures such as Laozi as divine.<sup>47</sup> Again, given such evidence we might learn that wisdom and revelation are not necessarily opposing categories<sup>48</sup> even if the order of their appearance and their spiritual relevance for the concrete life of the respective societies is not the same as in the Abrahamic context.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. What is the Dao?

One important point must be mentioned before all else: all Chinese religions (and philosophical schools) relate in one or another way to the Dao, not only Daoism.<sup>50</sup> Confucianism and other Chinese schools (such as Legalism or Mohism) as well as Chinese Buddhism also speak of and identify with the concept of the Dao even if they perceive and conceive it differently.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, in all Chinese wisdom schools and religions (or intersecting religious streams) the Dao presents what we could call ultimate reality. Accordingly, Alan Watts, one of the most well known popularizers of the “strange” imaginations and thoughts of Daoism and Buddhism in the west in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, defines the Dao as “the mystery that we can never understand — the unity that underlies the opposites.”<sup>52</sup> This “definition” gives us a first hint at the profound nature of the concept and its importance, namely, besides any particularities and pedantries to connect us with the world as a whole in such a way that the most hidden secret of the inner workings of the world is revealed: that there are no fixed oppositions or opposites;<sup>53</sup> that all is always involved in the movement of one into the other; that not divisive strive has the last word, but the harmony of oppositional movements.<sup>54</sup>

Dao means the Way and the Method that the world movement is exhibiting in everything.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, all things are *daos*, actions and activities engaged in such movements of overcoming oppositions and creating ever-new harmonies. This world activity is what is understood as the “natural” process of things.<sup>56</sup> Nature (*ziran*) means that which operates on its own; everything exists and proceeds by itself, is “self-so.”<sup>57</sup> The best one can do when one has gained this

insight is to let the Dao work through all actions one performs, that is, if one does not try to act against the flow of the movements of harmonization, but acts with it. In doing so, one reaches the height of activity in accordance with the Dao as long as one does not (coercively) act against its all-wise movements (*wu wei*).<sup>58</sup> And if one learns to live this way, one becomes a perfect human being (*zhenren*).<sup>59</sup>

The Dao is the ultimate of ultimates, the unnamable, but it is manifest in all phenomena (without being identical with them).<sup>60</sup> “How deep and mysterious this unity is/How profound, how great!/It is the truth beyond the truth, /the hidden within the hidden/It is the path to all wonder/the gate to the essence of everything.”<sup>61</sup> We are reminded of similar Bahá’í expressions of ultimate reality as can be found in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings indicating the unknowable,<sup>62</sup> but all-pervasive divine reality beyond any name (*al-haqq*)<sup>63</sup> and the mutuality of even these “opposites”<sup>64</sup>: “*O Thou Who art the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden!*” [PM #155]<sup>65</sup>

## 5. Who is Laozi?

Laozi figures as the “founder” of (philosophical) Daoism.<sup>66</sup> Yet, this description is already tainted by western misperceptions. Laozi was for all intents and purposes a sage who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., presumably before the Buddha. He was – trusting tradition – a scribe and scholar at the exceptional library of the court of Zhou (an extraordinary achievement in itself). In these traditions, he appears as the teacher of Confucius, although this is less clear as he may instead represent a culmination or personification of the confluence of several ancient and honored traditions and personalities.<sup>67</sup> Maybe he is just a literary figure identified with an “Old Master” (Lao-Zi)<sup>68</sup> who represents and functions as a convergence of the old wisdom sayings of the Zhou time collected into the *Laozi* or *Dao De Jing*. First mention of his identity as a person is made long after he is supposed to have lived, namely, in the *Book of History* (*Shih Ji*) around 150 B.C.E., which also makes mention of “Daoism” as an already established philosophical school at that time.<sup>69</sup>

Laozi is often depicted as an old man with long white beard (westerners may immediately identify someone else with this description), riding a bull, riding to leave his country because no one wants to hear his wisdom, or, much later, as a divinity in ornate attire enthroned in heaven.<sup>70</sup> The story is passed down that Confucius asked Laozi for advice on rituals (*li*) related to ghosts and ancestors still roaming the world and haunting, in the opinion of the people, their families and villages. Laozi is presented here as a soul-guide who knows how to perform rituals for the save passage of the departed or to accompany the shamanic journey of the soul into spiritual realms.<sup>71</sup> In any case, the importance of this development of the figure of Laozi with his growing myth and divinization over the next millennium in the east is only underscored by his elation to the status of one of the rare “axial” philosophical, religious and spiritual figures in the west by which the German philosopher Karl Jasper’s famously identified the revolutionary and decisive axial age of human awakening to a new universal spiritual consciousness in a timeframe of several centuries around the mid first millennium B.C.E., a status only rivaled by figures such as Socrates, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Confucius and Isaiah.<sup>72</sup>

These old stories already show influences of the two other important religions of Chinese culture, Confucianism and Buddhism, which will, in this triangulation, drive the dynamic of Chinese religions and culture for the centuries to come.<sup>73</sup> In Daoist lore, Laozi is introduced as the sage by whom Daoism or certain Daoist schools assert its superiority over Confucianism and Buddhism and their related schools. He is the superior wise man. He was supposedly born from a virgin after having been sixty (!) or so years in her body, emerging an “old baby” when he finally came into this world (one meaning of “Laozi” is “old boy”).<sup>74</sup> That he is imagined to be the superior sage can also be witnessed by the belief that when he left his country he is said to have gone to India and to have taught the Buddha or even to have been reborn as the Buddha.<sup>75</sup>

Here, as Bahá’ís will notice, a transformation takes place that resonates with the Bahá’í teachings of recurrent Manifestations of the divine. And in the case of Laozi, it is even a movement *across* religions.<sup>76</sup> In other instantiations of such a cyclical recurrence, the divine figures like that of Hindu Avatars and the infinite Buddhas of



Mahayana generally remain within their own religious sphere to express the uniqueness and identity of these traditions.<sup>77</sup> An interesting exception occurs with the Vaishnavite belief that the Buddha is integral to the series of Avatars of Vishnu or Krishna.<sup>78</sup> Yet in this case, for similar reasons that Daoism taught that Laozi was instructing or even becoming the Buddha, this crossing of religious boundaries and integration of foreign or even hostile figures was meant to demonstrate the superiority of the “parent” religion<sup>79</sup> – something Bahá’u’lláh has categorically rejected.<sup>80</sup>

## 6. What is the *Laozi* (or the *Dao De Jing*)?

The story of Laozi in the *Book of History* culminates in the significant event of the creation of the *Dao De Jing*.<sup>81</sup> In protest to the unwise government of the Zhou, Laozi decides to from China.<sup>82</sup> One may understand this move as spiritual retreat from political machinations, or, by giving it a different twist, one could also view this act as a more radical protest since it was assumed that to life in China meant to be in the sphere of civilization while outside China basically barbarism had the rule.<sup>83</sup> Not only does such a political protest in Laozi’s act of emigration, if it may be assumed, uncover this so-called “civilization,” so held high by its powers-to-be, as itself corrupt and barbarian.<sup>84</sup> This highly symbolic statement also could have implied that Laozi was forgoing the folk belief, or was accepting the consequences of abandoning this belief, that one part of the multilayered human soul must be buried in Chinese earth in order for the departed person to have immortal life.<sup>85</sup>

Now, at the border, the guard, who is the silent hero of this story, discovers that the approaching rider is Laozi (what a feat considering the vast land that was and is China!), the famous sage, and after hearing his story asks him, at least, before he leaves to write down his wisdom so that future generations would not forever be bereft of his insights and all knowledge of ultimate reality, and a life according to its eternal laws would be lost. In one hour, so the story continues, Laozi writes the whole wisdom of existence down in only five thousand characters – the time dilation and brevity being the signs of his extreme wisdom. Thus was created the *Dao De Jing*.<sup>86</sup>

The received text of the *Laozi* is a *collection*<sup>87</sup> of short, poetic, mystical, ethical and political sayings, interspersed with longer comments of explanation.<sup>88</sup> It is structured into eighty-one chapters. Note that this reflects nine to the second power, nine being the Chinese number of the Emperor, heavenly order and long lastingness<sup>89</sup> — somewhat in resonance with the Bahá'í understanding of the number nine, besides being the Abjad number of the word *bahá'*.<sup>90</sup> Further, the *Laozi* has two parts: the *Dao Jing*, which explores the nature of ultimate reality (*dao*), and the *De Jing*, which meditates on the cultivation of the virtues (*de*) of the Dao necessary to become a sage and a perfect human being, or to rule justly and to order society according to cosmic harmony.<sup>91</sup>

Research has shone that this is a very old structure, maybe finding together as a collection as early as 500 B.C.E.,<sup>92</sup> which we can already find settled in the oldest extant versions of the text from around 300 B.C.E., excavated in the 1970s and 1990s.<sup>93</sup> The characters of the *Laozi* are painted on bamboo strips, which are attached to one another and can be rolled up so as to not lose their integrity as a whole. While over the centuries the order of the two parts may have been reversed in some collections, the general structure and order of the sayings are preserved.<sup>94</sup> The characters are of ancient complexity, and no translation can hope to fathom the depth of the field of reference they invoke or to establish a final correct relationship between them.<sup>95</sup> This fact, and the perceived depth of insight that the *Laozi* conveys, has led to one of the vastest libraries of commentaries and translations of any Chinese classic, maybe only rivaled by that of the Bible.<sup>96</sup>

## 7. Understanding Philosophical Daoism (*Dao Jia*)

Given all of these uncertainties, but also the astonishing integrity of the text of the *Dao De Jing*, we can expect a great variety of interpretations<sup>97</sup> as the context changes over the course of time and the transformations of Chinese culture, that is, as the text moves through its use by different schools of thought<sup>98</sup> and also begins to serve a variety of political interests<sup>99</sup> as well as the mutual discussions and strives for supremacy with and between other Chinese religions, especially Confucianism and Buddhism.<sup>100</sup> If we try to situate the text of the *Laozi* in its own process of becoming, we will, however, gain

some valuable insight in its meaning or, at least, some layers of its perceived importance.

Here is one such attempt. The *Laozi* as well as Daoism as philosophy in general should be understood as a reaction against Confucianism (not as its origin).<sup>101</sup> It explores an alternative to Confucian imperialism that in comparison exhibits the characteristics and implementation of a highly hierarchically stratified society, a petrified system of education (canalizing mostly the control over of the court scribes, religious representatives and other political officials) and the worship of the court as means of political unification of the diverse lands and regional powers. Daoism, instead, appeals to the equality of all people and diverse peoples of the realm, favors small integrated communities instead of large political entities of military and economic power that shift wealth to the political and religious elites, and, hence, intends to function as a model of life in which power is distributed among a vast multiplicity of communities.<sup>102</sup>

This counter-imagination of living together is in itself obviously a dangerous idea to entertain in a society that is based on idealized and divinized political and religious powers, and its reservoir of alternative ideas and ways of living has, in fact, led to occasional political tumult and insurrections against the sanctioned establishment.<sup>103</sup> The concurrent Daoist ethics that grounds this (some would say) anarchic understanding of society has left us with one of the earliest instantiations of cultural, political and spiritual relativism, which was based on the insistence on individual responsibility (instead of obedience to authority), mutual dependence of all people and institutions (instead of divinization of higher institutions and personalities), and a life that is oriented toward living in harmony with nature (*ziran*) and its cycles (instead of the excesses of poisoning social constructions).<sup>104</sup>

The inner working of this universe of discourse is based on the precise understanding of the Dao as the way and method of living – or skill at living.<sup>105</sup> The Dao, here, is not a *description* of reality or ultimate reality, for that matter, but *prescribes* a way of acting with the flow of nature (and the nature of things).<sup>106</sup> The Dao does not tell us what is or why it is, but *how* acts can be performed in accordance to the rules of the natural, all-pervading movement of the Dao. If

one “follows” the Dao, one knows how to perform something the right way.<sup>107</sup> The Dao cannot be known (theoretically); it must be done. One must train in the Dao’s way by learning to see the signs of the natural movement of all things and by acting accordingly. To follow the Dao is akin to the know-how of cutting wood the right way, that is, not counter to its nature, its appearance, its structures and patterns. One cuts wood without effort if one knows how to follow these natural forms given in the pattern of a piece of wood;<sup>108</sup> one traces the Dao if one knows how a situation has arisen and will develop and without effort follows its development.<sup>109</sup>

Daoism’s relativistic claim is based on a divergent interpretation from Confucianism and other (political) schools.<sup>110</sup> For Confucian philosophy, the Dao is a universal law that dictates the social relationships as a norm-system one must follow in order not to lose one’s face or honor.<sup>111</sup> Mohism embraced this approach and understood the Dao to represent a norm of existence we must pursue.<sup>112</sup> Yet, Daoism critiqued this approach and instead understood at least the universal Dao not as normative rule, because any norm is itself a *dao* that needs a justification in a higher norm (*dao*). This leads to an infinite regress without finding a highest norm from which the hierarchical claim of Confucianism could be justified.<sup>113</sup> Yet the consequence Daoism draws from this insight is not that this regress is absurd, as western logic might have concluded, but that the universal Dao is beyond any norm, that the ultimate is relativistic, depriving us of any ability for the deduction of norms.<sup>114</sup> Hence, social order is uncovered here as relative, that is, as a social construction, not as a natural necessity; and, hence, political power must be considered as relative, too.<sup>115</sup>

The Daoist Dao is, therefore, set against and highly critical of any fixed norm system and in some radical sense anarchic (or based on spontaneity).<sup>116</sup> It proposes that there cannot be only one norm system of society one must follow as a divine order, but suggests many equally valid ways of living together. The natural norm is, now, that of a nature that moves in cycles of harmonization, universally and in the mutual relationship of all things, persons, forms and structures.<sup>117</sup> As nature does not force any natural norm or law, many societies can co-exist and coinhere without force and with different

rules according to their situatedness and internal and external relationships in any given moment of their mutual interference.<sup>118</sup>

This Daoist interpretation of reality reveals two related perspectives: On the one hand, the Dao is *mystical* as it is inaccessible and beyond any articulation (as a norm); it is mirrored only in the experience of the experienced master, sage and perfect human being.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, the Dao is *relativistic*, but in the sense of the mutual relationship of all beings in their coinherent movement of living together; and the *daos* (acts, norms) do not “exist” out there, but must be created in the flow of things and acts.<sup>120</sup>

## 8. Understanding the *Dao De Jing*

The inherent paradox that the *Laozi* displays in such a mystical and relativistic understanding of the Dao is staggering, because it conveys the counter-movement of two in themselves coherent, but mutually seemingly excluding expressions of existence. On the one hand, the *mystical* insight of someone following the Dao would indicate that one *can* know how to act in accordance with the Dao; but, on the other hand, because of the *relativistic* side there is no fixed anchor in any ultimate expression of the Dao that justifies any particular direction of acting as normative or “in the right way.” In other words, to follow the Dao means that there is no “right” Dao to pursue. Only if one gains the insight that there is not one “right” Dao to follow, one actually follows the Dao.<sup>121</sup>

The ethical implications are of utmost relevance here: one should not cling to tradition, rigid rightness and correct language if one wants to follow the Dao. The wisdom of achieving perfection does not appear by following preconceived virtues, but by learning to performing “virtuosity” in living (*de*), the ethical impulse of the Dao.<sup>122</sup> The *Laozi* explains that it is not nature that is ambivalent, but society; society’s constructed norms are forceful misconstructions of the flow of the Dao in the interconnectedness of all things.<sup>123</sup> It is not nature, but society that with its social norms and tainted language creates the very desires that deprives us of deeper insight into the Dao. It is not nature, but society that is at the root of evils as it forces us into unnatural desires and conflicts laying life’s course

out as a matter of competition and war.<sup>124</sup> Peace comes only through harmony with nature and the Dao that is *its* nature.<sup>125</sup>

The interesting insight that follows from this paradox is that only without fixed norms and preconceived patterns of existence do we become able to withhold from a life of conflict and war. By becoming mutually coinherent, we lose the ability to “other” the stranger, the other culture or religion. In not acting forcefully, we harmonize with Harmony itself. War and strife are, in this understanding, not an implication of nature, but of society, tradition, blind obedience, socially awakened desires, fads, compromises of self-interest, competition, mutual exclusion, and the clash of force and counter-force. It is not law and order that guaranty peace, but, on the contrary, the anarchy of moving harmony. It is not determination of rightness, but the relativity of living together in concrete circumstances in which the Dao becomes the event of peace. Peace arises “self-so” (*ziran*) not by acting, but by letting be (*wu wei*) of any presupposed concept and the division that it would induce.<sup>126</sup> This is the meta-theme of the *Laozi*; this is the way of the Dao: “The Dao/Way that can be dao-ed/walked is not the constant Dao/Way. The name/language that can be named/spoken/expressed is not the constant name/language.”<sup>127</sup>

If we were to penetrate deeper into the spirit of the Chinese relationship between the three great traditions, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, it would be at this point that we could find a hint enlightening the very fact that there were never religious wars between them. While quarrels always arose were respective representatives of these traditions were self-involved with political interests and powers over the centuries of their coexistence and interaction, these conflicts never amounted to the religious wars raging between the Abrahamic religions and the various factions within them, leaving trails and rivers of blood in the western chronicles of history to this very day.<sup>128</sup> It is the interconnectedness of this relativity of the Dao in all things that resonated with the Mahayana notion of co-origination or dependent co-arising (*pratitya-samutpada*); and it is the relativism of withholding the attachment to fixed norms that mirrors Buddhist detachment in the same way that the Daoist insight of the constructedness and impermanence of any social structure as well as any desire created by social interaction

resonates deeply with the attitude of overcoming impermanence by such detachment.<sup>129</sup> Since this attitude is one of peace, it can only be found in the heightening and refinement of the perception of the harmonies in the flowing multiplicity of happenings that constitute any situation and world, much like the coincidence of detachment and compassion in Buddhism.<sup>130</sup>

Another Daoist insight strengthens this impression. The eternal or constant Dao, since it follows no rule besides interconnectedness and harmonization of opposites, is itself bare of interest or self-existence.<sup>131</sup> The Dao is empty (*wu*), like the ultimate reality in Buddhism, *nirvana*, the state beyond being and non-being, or *dharmakaya*, the Dharma-body of the Buddha, the transcendent Wisdom of emptiness of all phenomena (*sunyata*).<sup>132</sup> The Dao is not a being, but nothingness (*wuji*), and as such it is the mother of all things (*taiji*).<sup>133</sup> “The Dao is both Named and Nameless / As Nameless, it is the origin of all things / As Named, it is the mother of all things.”<sup>134</sup> In fact, all happenings (*daos*) are empty (*wu*), that is, again correlative to Buddhism, impermanent, changing, related to all other *daos*, and spontaneous (creative).<sup>135</sup> There are infinitely many *daos* and the world is their infinite movement without beginning and end.

The relativistic ethic of Daoism, then, imprints on its adherents values of tolerance, cooperation, mutual understanding and peace. It instills on us<sup>136</sup> the importance of non-violence: that it is better to be like water that collects itself at the lowest point and, in its patient letting be, is stronger in weakness than the force of a rock, which is formed by water.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, we are asked to always differentiate into more than two *daos*, that is, always to escape the dualism of opposition and strife.<sup>138</sup> Finally, we are lured into becoming creative, that is, self-responsible, not to (blindly) follow traditional norms, but to always create new ways that escape oppositional thinking and acting.<sup>139</sup> In this sense, we are reminded of many Bahá’í principles of non-oppositional unity and difference, mutuality and creative responsibility<sup>140</sup> and may marvel in the fact that these insights appeared not late in any assumed spiritual maturation of humanity, but were already always there to be perceived and to be activated.<sup>141</sup>

## 9. Resonances with the Bahá'í Faith

Of the many resonances with the Bahá'í Faith, I will only name a few, the ones that immediately demonstrate the congruence of their intentions even while coming from vastly different cultures and times.<sup>142</sup> First, the Dao, ultimate Reality, is a mystery, utterly unapproachable, beyond any category and expression of itself while all else is *its* expression – like the unknowable essence of the “(God) Beyond” (the utter divine transcendence as understood in the Bahá'í context) and the infinity of divine attributes that constitute the essence of all things (divine immanence) – all together faint expressions of the apophatic unmanifest Ultimate and the plurisignality of the manifest God (Primal Manifestation, Mind, Will, Spirit, Word, Light).<sup>143</sup> Both the Dao's apophatic and manifest “oneness” is like unto that of the Bahá'í understanding, while on the vastly different background of Islamic thought, namely, not a number, a one, and not any “form” of identity such as an self-identical being or of any “character” of sameness.<sup>144</sup> In this sense, the Reality (*al-haqq*) of the Dao is “empty” (*wu*) of secondary differentiations, abstractions and projections.<sup>145</sup> Like the central Islamic term for the unity of God, *tawhid*, the Dao is inexpressible, beyond (any limiting notion of) oneness and multiplicity alike,<sup>146</sup> but – other than purely iconoclastic readings of this unity – out of its generosity their “friend.”<sup>147</sup> The Dao is like unto the Godhead beyond any attributes (or indifferent from them in their infinity)<sup>148</sup> and, hence, beyond any “kinds” of opposites, divisions, and divides.<sup>149</sup> Yet, it also seeks to *overcome* such opposites – which is the secret of the first message of Bahá'u'lláh at the first Ridván: that there is only unity if it realizes itself (or we let it realize itself) beyond strife and war.<sup>150</sup> And the Dao is spontaneous, without reason creating and letting everything create their reality from the infinity of “divine” immanence in everything.<sup>151</sup> The Dao/ Reality is always manifesting as and in renewal. “For if God speaks a word today that comes to be on the lips of all the people, before and after, that word will be new, if you only think about it.”<sup>152</sup>

Second, the Daoism of Laozi engenders in us<sup>153</sup> the ancient knowledge of the relativity of religious truth that the Bahá'í Faith made its central conviction.<sup>154</sup> “Our” *dao* is relative to the exigencies of the time;<sup>155</sup> it expresses itself differently in different minds;<sup>156</sup> and



it reflects the unique mixture of attributes one realizes from its infinity in one's "character" (of persons, times, cultures, religions)<sup>157</sup> – much like the contextual relativity of revelations and their finite reception by any peoples as related by Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>158</sup> *"The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man – finite mind – and are conditioned by its limitations"* [GWB #26].

Third, in relation to the so-called principles of the Bahá'í Faith,<sup>159</sup> we find the *Laozi* to inculcate similar or resonant spiritual and ethical, social and political impulses.<sup>160</sup> To follow the universally harmonizing Dao, one must become empty of Self (*wu*) and in letting go become a universal person receptive to the flow of things, perceptive of the whole world at any moment.<sup>161</sup> One must learn to relate harmoniously one to the other and everything, and try to engage any situation from a non-oppositional and creative perspective that avoids, overcomes, or mitigates oppositions. In this context, opinions only become relevant if they are mutually justifying their differences, that is, if they employ the movement of unity (of differences) into a peaceful future.<sup>162</sup> Further, one should not imitate any social norm just because of its constancy within certain traditions or because it is held up by any social, cultural, political, or religious authority. Rather, one should begin to think, see, perceive and act from one's own insight into one's interconnectedness with everything and everyone in every situation. One should also avoid prejudices, as they are nothing but stabilized oppositions locking us into our thoughts, language and habits that again force destruction, superiority and supersession to arise.<sup>163</sup> The most basic impulse of the *Laozi* is the "ecological" unification of the whole world, not just of humanity,<sup>164</sup> into one movement of a multiplicity, that is, the manifold of interrelated *daos*/ways in which religions, cultures, and humanity in their diversity are related as one movement of peace.<sup>165</sup> One is immediately reminded of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's allegory of the diverse beauty of a garden as an ecological image of unity and interconnection. Here mutual relatedness and peaceful differentiation, complexity and beauty become measures of unity and peace.<sup>166</sup> To follow the Dao means to live without any fixed way, always anew, always engaged in an evolving mindscape of peace that is already the ultimate reality of the movement toward itself.<sup>167</sup>

Fourth, from the aforementioned points it may have become clear that unity is valued higher than the particular claim of truth of/for oneself over (and against) others or the particular importance of one's actions and thought over (and against) others. As perceiving truth is related to different situations, limitations, and the manifold of realizations of the attributes of reality, so is practicing truth also always already a matter of situatedness and receptiveness.<sup>168</sup> To seek unity through communication or consultation is the “natural” way to go, that is, a way that overcomes the poisonous creations of desires in societies, as is the fact that such processes of harmonization will emphasize the minorities among themselves since such harmonizations can never be suppressive of differences, but must highlight them in a manifold of togetherness by which unity is enriched.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, difference is *essential* to any deep understanding of unity<sup>170</sup> and has priority over “being right” – much like Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá teach.<sup>171</sup>

Nevertheless, Daoism provides its challenges for a Bahá’í understanding of religious unity and equality. The question is, for instance, how (or even whether) we can find a space “within” the coordinate system of a universe of discourse that has (not necessarily originated, but) mostly developed in the western or at least Abrahamic context, or better: how to expand and transform this coordinate system so as to allow for unity on the basis of a more universal equality?<sup>172</sup> In fact, Daoism challenges us to constantly remain aware of the limitations of such traditional molds of understanding the depth of its intention and message.<sup>173</sup> We note that the vast Daoist universe of discourse in its internal diversity and complexity, and its multiplicity of sources and dimensions, is not bound by categories of revelation or prophetic establishment, any necessarily personal notion of God or an ultimate Reality conceived as God at all.<sup>174</sup>

Although Daoist explications of existence can occasionally approximate some of the Abrahamic categories with the implied worldview of a history of divine interaction with the world and humanity and a soteriology that wants to liberate humanity from its predicament (*Heilsgeschichte*),<sup>175</sup> note also that it is not primarily interested in such a framework, but rather rests on wisdom of self-cultivation, critical of habitual sedimentations, and living with

“nature” (*ziran*, self-so) more than with any Godhead.<sup>176</sup> And we note also that there is the radical social criticism and (epistemological and ontological) relativism regarding constructions of power and an equally anarchic perspective on the movement of the world from spontaneity, rather than any fixed order; there is no eternal law to follow, except the apophatic movement of harmonization.<sup>177</sup> The Daoist watchword is *creativity* (or spontaneity) in which everything else is enfolded.<sup>178</sup> Hence, we, from a receptive Bahá’í context of listening, will only make progress in appreciating even this seeming “strangeness” (of non-theism, non-controlling and -controlled order of creativity, of spontaneous happenings, of radical immanence of ultimate reality in the cosmic movements) as expression of philosophical communication and religious oneness<sup>179</sup> when we learn to understand all of these terms in a different way, namely, on their own background: that of the eternal becoming of harmonies.<sup>180</sup> In this context, historical progress is nothing compared with the insights of the cyclical workings of the universe.<sup>181</sup> And this approach shows itself even in the fact that ancient sages could develop notions of a universal civilization of peace that defies any simple understanding of progression.<sup>182</sup>

The implications for a fruitful (interreligious) conversation will be far-reaching, beyond any specific engagement with a specific wisdom tradition, but we may learn a great deal from the unique feature of the Daoist universe of discourse and spirituality. If we, for instance, recognize and acknowledge that the *Dao De Jing* indicates a major milestone in (and for) the development of a world civilization,<sup>183</sup> the fact that it has (yet) to become a consciously perceived, even if unconsciously already permeating, part of the universal unity of religions projected in the Bahá’í universe of discourse will lead to the question, how this (compared with other religious traditions) relative absence of sustained reflections and dialogues, acknowledging, engaging, and even integrating its contributions, maybe transformed into the structuring of a future, developed Bahá’í self-consciousness of having fulfilled and sublimated (or even subsumed) all such earlier endeavors as their culmination?<sup>184</sup> Hopefully, future realizations of unity and difference in the spirit of receptivity and mutuality, especially from the Bahá’í perspective, will show.<sup>185</sup> The profound challenge that the contrasted differences and resonances, especially in the reception of the *Dao De Jing*, provide if they are engaged in a

spirit of unity may be that we will want to accept, or even love,<sup>186</sup> the insight that the unity of religions can never be understood, or merely achieved, as a fixed state, but must always (anew) be performed in processes of profound mutual contrasting.<sup>187</sup> We shall (and will want to) seek mutuality with the “other” and one another, contemporaneously and diachronically, allowing for surprising supplementations of the known by the unknown; and we must (and will always want to) be ready to be enriched by future *and* past contributions,<sup>188</sup> from wherever they arise.<sup>189</sup> Mutual respect and learning are not just practical virtues, then, but divine characteristics of a “unity in multiplicity”<sup>190</sup> that the Bahá’í reading of its own tradition and of the signs of the world, its predicaments, pressing issues, and diagnoses of illness needs to unfold as it unfolds itself. Maybe the contributions of the *Dao De Jing* (among other classics of Chinese philosophical, and wisdom, and religious traditions), as it speaks surprisingly with a fresh and current voice today, may not only contribute to the colors of the garden of truth and a future civilization of peace, but also, with its holistic, yet processual view of all spheres of human life, from individual and social virtues to ecological and cosmic integrity, uniquely color their realization.

## 10. Is Laozi a “Lost Prophet”?

After these short approximations to and glimpses in to the nature and relevance of Daoism, Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* in their contributions for the foundation of Chinese civilization,<sup>191</sup> if not human civilization, their importance for the Bahá’í universe of discourse, and from a current global consciousness of interreligious conversations for a future civilization of peace, I can now address a question that has lingered beneath these considerations all along. Given everything mentioned above, of resonance between one of the oldest living religions and wisdoms on this earth and the Bahá’í Faith, one of the youngest religions: what should we think of Laozi and the *Laozi* in a Bahá’í universe? How can this sage and this book be related to the scheme of cyclical revelation throughout the history and becoming of humanity as embraced and expounded by the Bahá’í universe?<sup>192</sup> Could we think of Laozi in terms of, or at least similar to, a Manifestation, such as (or much like) the Buddha and Jesus? And if not, how do we understand the fascinating congruencies between

these profound religious traditions, bridging several thousands of years, if one of them were not to be considered to be authorized by “divine inspiration” or “revelation,” but derives from “nature” the common essential ingredients of a divine, human, religious and universal unity and a peace for which the Bahá’í Faith stands?<sup>193</sup> The Bahá’í writings give us very few hints as to the station of Laozi and his namesake book. Of course, as already mentioned, the general rule of Bahá’u’lláh that all religions reflect one apophatic divine source, would imply that Daoism is (and has itself proven to be) a *true* religion so that we would be justified to spiritually understand and revere its scriptures,<sup>194</sup> especially the *Laozi*, and consider them in some meaningful sense as a “revelation” of the mystery beyond names.<sup>195</sup> But even if so, we are in a more precarious situation as the Bahá’í writings seem, at the same time, to deny Laozi the status of a Manifestation or Prophet, minor or major. “Regarding Lao-Tse,” Shoghi Effendi writes, “The Bahá’ís do not consider him a prophet, or even a secondary prophet or messenger, unlike Buddha or Zoroaster, both of whom were divinely-appointed and fully independent Manifestations of God.”<sup>196</sup> Conversely, it is interesting to note that both the Muslim Ahmediyyah community and the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion (originating in the same general timeframe) accept Laozi as divine Manifestation, much like the Buddha.<sup>197</sup>

However, despite Shoghi Effendi’s statement that Bahá’ís don’t know of Laozi as a Manifestation, we cannot (on its own and by its singular status) be sure what this statement actually includes or excludes. Considering the stunning synergies between Daoism and the Bahá’í Faith – not forgetting that Daoism is a valuable and important dialogue partner in the interreligious dialogues worldwide today, but also that such a dialogue is what Bahá’u’lláh has asked us to pursue<sup>198</sup> – we seem at least to owe ourselves, and for the purpose of the imperative to pursue universal religious dialogue, the effort to understand as much as possible the *coordinates* that would allow us to explore the relationship the Bahá’í writings can invite us to establish with Laozi and his book, the *Dao De Jing*. I understand this situation as an appeal to create a tentative and open framework in which it becomes possible and fitting actually to pursue such relationships, practically, in spiritual community, but also in reflection on the potentials of mutual consciousness and insight inherent in such a universal religious community.<sup>199</sup> Such an approach

could maybe begin with ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s wise instruction to engage with the Chinese religious, spiritual and philosophical mind and heart, and its sages and scriptures: “*imbued with their spirit; know their sacred literature; ...and speak to them from their own standpoint, and their own terminologies.*”<sup>200</sup> So, here are, from my understanding of the potentials such an approach could have for the Bahá’í universe of discourse, *eight theses* for an open framework of mutual interreligious communication, pondering on why maybe, or maybe why not, and in what sense the sage Laozi (and his book) might be considered a mirror of the Sun of Truth. Yet, as such a space of potential differentiations is not meant to define a specific outcome, a definitive answer, it rather wants to envision and tentatively walk through a *field of perceptivity* in which the concept of Manifestations (and its relation to religious communities and their truth claims) can shine in its fascinating complexity for further interreligious investigations in general.

## **Thesis 1: Laozi was a holy soul, influenced by the Buddha**

According to this thesis, which is occasionally ventilated in Bahá’í reflections on the matter, Laozi is not a Manifestation or Prophet in the Bahá’í sense, but a holy and pure soul who, like Confucius,<sup>201</sup> was under the influence of another (acceptable) Manifestation, namely the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. This view is partly based on the understanding of the reflectivity of the Logos/Will/Mind of God, the primordial Manifestation of Divinity, in creation and through the pure and stainless souls of the Prophets, the Manifestations proper,<sup>202</sup> who again reflect their reality in holy souls that would always rise in the wake of the revelation of a new Manifestation, either contemporarily or in the span of their dispensational force field.<sup>203</sup> Like the apostles of Christ, Laozi would be a reflection of the Sun of Truth that appeared “in” the (wake of the) Manifestation of the Buddha, who again is the primordial reflection of the Self of God (which again is the primordial Manifestation of the apophatic ultimate “Reality Beyond”).<sup>204</sup>

While such a solution allows us to recognize connections between the accepted (known) Manifestations in the Bahá’í context and many holy figures or sages during the centuries, appearing in relation or in

parallel to these prophetic figures,<sup>205</sup> much like the prophetic figures of the Mosaic dispensation (after and under the umbrella of Moses), it is also fraught with several serious problems. First of all, Daoism is *older* than Buddhism. It cannot without grave limitations be understood to have arisen in the wake of Buddhism.<sup>206</sup> At least traditionally, Laozi lived before the Buddha — a problem that this solution shares with the question whether or not Confucius was a Manifestation, who also lived before the Buddha and who traditionally was thought to have visited Laozi and accepted him as his teacher.<sup>207</sup> Even if the traditional chronology may not hold up to historical scrutiny, as we may assume that the legendary sage Erh (Laozi) might have lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. while the *Laozi* was created or compiled between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., the main counter argument still remains, namely, that Daoism is older than Buddhism. However, even if this was not the case, we must not forget that Buddhism entered China only at the time of the Han dynasty between the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E., long after both the alleged lifetime of Laozi and the creation of the *Dao De Jing*.<sup>208</sup> We must also take into consideration that it was the Daoist substrate that facilitated the survival of Buddhism in China while it was disappearing in India over the next centuries either by being reappropriated into Hinduism or by being eradicated by Islamic occupation.<sup>209</sup> Moreover, it was mediated through Daoism and especially through Laozi and the *Laozi* that Buddhism developed into new and important branches, which became influential and are still with us today, not only in East Asia, but also in America and Europe (for instance, Chan, Hua Yen, Tian Tai, and other forms of Mahayana Buddhism); and so was Zen enfolding a synthesis with Daoist streams, perpetuating its inherent influence worldwide to this day.<sup>210</sup> Hence, the assumption of a movement of influence opposite to the proposed thesis is not only more probable regarding origins and historical development, but also on the symbolic level as Laozi in later Daoism was understood to have been the teacher of the Buddha, and the Buddha was even proclaimed the return of Laozi.<sup>211</sup>

## Thesis 2: Laozi was a sage, transmitting an older Chinese “revelation”

There are, in fact, in Chinese cultural memory indications of mythical figures who have been considered the founders of Chinese culture or even humanity such as the divine Yellow Emperor and the figure of Fu Xi, a legendary emperor and mythological author of the ancient *Yi Jing* who is considered somewhat similar to the mythological Adam of biblical heritage (which to mythological consciousness also appeared to be historical).<sup>212</sup> The reason to think in this way in a Bahá’í perspective would be that, if we rule out thesis 1, namely, that the Buddha is the “origin” and overarching force field for the emergence of Laozi, we might think of Laozi as the mirror or companion of an older Chinese Manifestation of which we have lost record.<sup>213</sup> The Bahá’í writings expect that *every* culture would have had their Manifestations even before the ones known today. In fact, Shoghi Effendi partly justifies his reluctance to widen speculation to other than the recorded figures named in the scriptural Bahá’í writings on this basis: that we have lost knowledge of older dispensations distributed throughout humanity and human pre-history.<sup>214</sup> They could, as Bahá’u’lláh says, have been the instigators of humanity’s cultural development in these older times, but were living, for instance, before writing could have preserved their memory.<sup>215</sup> Hence, it would make sense to postulate such a prophetic figure, which then would be the force field of revelation “in” which Laozi represents another mirror of rejuvenation or exploration.

What may count against this thesis, however, is the overwhelming evidence that it was not such an ancient figure of the unremembered past, but Laozi himself who was seen as the initiator of (philosophical) Daoism (*Dao Jia*), and who, in the further development of Daoism as a religion (*Dao Jiao*) in the first millennium C.E., began prominently to feature as divinity, even as one aspect of the highest Manifestations of ultimate reality in the Daoist understanding.<sup>216</sup> This development should give us pause: It is in the figure of Laozi and his book that it is at least questionable that China had not developed any idea of Manifestations of divine “revelation” and produced scriptures of such revelations, because it was precisely with Laozi and the *Laozi* that, over the coming centuries, the idea of apophatic divinity, divine Manifestations of



ultimate reality and scriptural revelation, *have* developed.<sup>217</sup> In fact, Laozi became the “face,” that is, *literally* the Manifestation of the highest mystery of ultimate reality expressed in the conception of the “Three Pure Ones.” Of them, he is the “face” of mystery, himself often represented as holding “the book” (the *Laozi*) — uncannily mirroring the Bahá’í understanding of the High Prophets or Manifestations as being the “face” of the unknowable Godhead and the ones bringing “the book,” that is, not only a new scripture, but the “Law” of the dispensation that decides its pattern of living.<sup>218</sup> Not only can the origin of the “Three Pure Ones” be traced back to the *Dao De Jing*, as it understands the origin of all things to proceed from the apophatic One that becomes Two (Yin, Yang) and then Three (The Three Pure Ones) from which, consequently, all things flow.<sup>219</sup> Moreover, within this logic of the Three-One, together with the apophatic One (*Yuanshi Tianzun*) and the Divine Treasure (*Lingbao Tienzun*), Laozi appears as “its” third aspect, the quintessence of the Way and Virtue (*Daode Tienzun*). The “face” of ultimate reality is none other than the divine Spirit of Laozi who, then, is nothing else but the human Manifestation of *the* Way (*the* universal Dao, ultimate reality) and all of “its” divine attributes or virtues.<sup>220</sup>

At this juncture, we may ask: What more and what other (additional) characteristics can we expect a Manifestation to exhibit to be called a Manifestation in a Bahá’í sense than being the very expression of ultimate Reality “in person” and bringing (revealing) “the book,” and being considered to have a human and a divine station and nature (rather similar to the development in Christianity,<sup>221</sup> maybe even under influence of its Chinese expansion)? But then, contrarily, we can also ask whether there is any evidence that Laozi, or Confucius, for that matter, considered himself, or claimed to be, a Manifestation?<sup>222</sup> As a final similarity we may also remember that this divine figure of Laozi, Lord Lao, was considered to undergo a rhythm of human appearances in a progression of revelations and Manifestations. Like the Reality of Bahá’u’lláh, Krishna and the Buddha, Laozi’s Reality (in Daoist scriptures) is understood to have come time and again into the world of humanity, even as the figure of the Buddha (but not confined to it) whom Bahá’ís consider as a genuine Manifestation.<sup>223</sup> But then, again, as this cyclical scheme of the divine reality of Lord Lao, appearing in a

figure of another religions, was created under the pressure resisting Buddhist expansionism, it might not create a reliable argument for the cyclicity and return of Manifestations in a Bahá'í understanding either.<sup>224</sup> What is more, despite the high station of Lord Lao, later developments in religious Daoism have not confirmed, or rather, shaded, the seeming importance of the divine figure.<sup>225</sup>

### **Thesis 3: Laozi was a “possible, but unknowable” Manifestation**

Shoghi Effendi's statement that Laozi is “not considered” a Manifestation in the Bahá'í context leaves space for an interpretation that takes into account the seeming conviction of the Guardian to not expand his interpretations of Bahá'í revelation beyond the boundaries of that which the texts actually say or give evidence for in his considerations when answering questions (thesis 2). It is quite often the case that we find in the corpus of Shoghi Effendi's letters (or letters written on his behalf) that he cautions the questioner about that which on any specific issue *can* actually be known *if* one takes the Bahá'í scriptural texts as a basis: sometimes nothing can be known, because nothing can be found or inferred regarding a specific question or matter; sometimes the evidence is scarce and caution is necessary not to overstep the boundaries of interpretation into fantasy.<sup>226</sup>

If we can understand Shoghi Effendi's statement regarding Laozi in this way, it would not mean a denial in principle, but it would rather indicate a *factual* impossibility to know whether Laozi was or was not a Manifestation since the Bahá'í scriptural sources do not indicate anything in either direction. On this view, all we can say is that the Bahá'í writings do not (as far as we know) mention Laozi either way. But given all the other criteria for discerning a Manifestation, as they eerily apply to Laozi and the *Laozi* (thesis 2), even if neither is mentioned in the canonical accounts, but since there is virtually no limitation to divine theophanies in the Bahá'í writings,<sup>227</sup> Laozi may *possibly* be a Manifestation or be a “possible” Manifestation. Yet this estimation must remain an open question in the current context, not only because of the silence of Bahá'í scriptures, but rather since we cannot exclude that later

Manifestations could clarify this matter and possibly refer to Laozi as such a Manifestation (thesis 6).

There is not much to say against such a thesis, except that we could ask the question what sense it would make to ponder the existence of a “possible” Manifestation of whom we cannot know factually whether s/he is one or not. I will come back to this question in thesis 5.

#### **Thesis 4: Laozi was no Manifestation, because Laozi did not exist**

Shoghi Effendi’s statement that Laozi should not be considered a Manifestation could also be understood as one *in principle*, that is, if it indicates a definitive knowledge that he was not a Manifestation. This would make sense if Laozi did never exist. In fact, more recent research has raised doubts regarding the historical existence of a singular figure named Laozi and, hence, of him being the author of the *Dao De Jing*. It is rather assumed that he was a “composite figure,” crystallizing a whole group of learned scholars of classical Chinese wisdom.<sup>228</sup> We know that the Zhou dynasty under which Laozi is assumed to have lived was cultured enough to entertain an imperial library and to employ scholars and scribes, collectors of literature, philosophy, art and law, and who were advisors and guardians of traditional wisdom.<sup>229</sup> Like many other anonymous texts, for instance of the Jewish wisdom literature (even the scriptural texts accepted in either the Hebrew Bible or diverse canonical versions of the Christian Old Testament), which are expected to be either collective endeavors of a group or received redactions over time,<sup>230</sup> we can reasonably assume a group of scribes, scholars and sages to have collected the ancient Chinese wisdom sayings in a book(or what, over time, became a condensed book) and by attaching it to one of the mythological or faintly historical figures, or still revered notables, remembered in Chinese history and named Laozi (as there are, in fact, more than one such figures related to our composite person Laozi).<sup>231</sup> And we know of at least one such school to have been entertained for some time during the fourth century B.C.E. that was capable to either collect the *Dao De Jing* (or one of its early versions) or hold high its memory without knowing its origins, but accepting some traditional ascription to a mythical sage named Laozi

who in the old sources was assumed to have been the one that Confucius had encountered in the search for some answers regarding the correct performance of ancestral rituals. In this case, we must still accept the acute relevance of the *Laozi* as a scriptural text of *religious* Daoism (in which the text unfolded) that Bahá'í should admire or revere, but without any knowable figure as its author. This would not be without precedence in the Bahá'í universe as it also accepts a Sabean/Sabian “revelation” of which we cannot even say exactly what group it represents (as different groups are indicated in different scriptural contexts), but of which we can definitely say that we have no idea of any founder, mythological or historical.<sup>232</sup>

### **Thesis 5: Laozi was an “incognito” Manifestation**

Although it is a somewhat strange assumption, at first, that a Manifestation, which should be considered an educator of humanity, could be unknown to his or her contemporaries, there are indications in the Bábi-Bahá'í literatures that such a possibility is not a priori excluded or under all conditions meaningless. A Manifestation might decide not to be known by anyone. This assumption can be traced back to an intriguing Shi'í theological speculation that there are not only known, but more often even unknown perfectly holy representatives of the Twelfth Imam or the Qa'im in the world<sup>233</sup> – almost like the “hidden” (*prachanna*) Buddhas in Theravada Buddhism.<sup>234</sup> In any case, the Báb did assume that it is a Manifestation's decision if, when, and how to reveal him- or herself to the world, depending on the situation.<sup>235</sup> What would happen if such a Manifestation decided not to reveal him- or herself? Would it not imply that this human figure was nevertheless a “hidden” Manifestation<sup>236</sup> – because Bahá'í scriptures would not accept any mere assumption scheme such as could also be witnessed in a group of Christian (Ebonite) views that holds that Jesus “became” the Son of God by adoption and exultation?<sup>237</sup> And wasn't any Manifestation before his or her declaration a hidden Manifestation?<sup>238</sup>

But what could be the meaning of such hiddenness, as it seems to contradict the very reason why a messenger of divine enlightenment, revelation, and education of humanity is sent to appear?<sup>239</sup> One reason may be found deeply embedded in the Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's understanding of the nature of a Manifestation. In the words of the

sixth Imam, both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh repeat in their writings that the *essence* of divinity consists in (the substance that is) *servitude*.<sup>240</sup> Bahá'u'lláh also describes the *divine* “station” of the Manifestation in terms of such servitude, not only “in the court” (the presence) of God in which the Manifestation shows no self (ego) except the Self of God, but even more so in the world in which s/he appears.<sup>241</sup> In other words, a Manifestation is a Manifestation *regardless* of whether s/he appears in the face of witnesses and can be experienced as a divine figure, a messenger or a prophet, *or* just as a mere human being, in his or her servitude as “merely” human being expressing his or her divinity as perfectly as would appear in any other (super-natural) impressions s/he might leave in the perception and understanding of humanity.<sup>242</sup> Laozi might have been such a Manifestation, then, one of absolute servitude, being anonymous, even incognito.<sup>243</sup> However, what counts against such a thesis in the case of Laozi is the fact that his anonymity could not have been absolute since Laozi, in fact, *was* known not only as a holy figure and sage, but even as a divinity, similar to the Christian development following the experience of Jesus's exultation, explicating itself in the apotheosis of Christ (thesis 2).<sup>244</sup>

## Thesis 6: Laozi was a “Manifestation” of Wisdom

The content of that which Bahá'ís may or may not consider a Manifestation is not as clear-cut as one might think at first glance. The first impression is that Manifestations are identical with the founders of religions, but limited to certain known figures of specific religions, such as the “nine” religions, which Bahá'í writers sometimes assume as “canonical” for the Bahá'í universe,<sup>245</sup> namely, that of Sabianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bábism and the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>246</sup> While it is true that Shoghi Effendi mentions those “nine” religions as the “only ones still existing,” he also avoids three possible reductionisms: first, that the number “nine” has a literal significance; second, that these are the only (true) religions associated with Manifestations, these Manifestations being the only ones; and, third, that this list is exhaustive of “true” religions.<sup>247</sup> In particular, first, the “nine” represents the *symbolic* number of fullness for the Bahá'í Faith, the Abjad number of the name of Bahá'u'lláh (BHA'), reflecting the

essence of all Manifestations as mirrors of the one Splendor or Glory of God (thesis 7).<sup>248</sup> Second, the often (in some combination) together and in association with some of the “nine” religions mentioned Manifestations, such as Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh<sup>249</sup> do in no way exhaust the Manifestations mentioned and assumed in the Bahá’í writings.<sup>250</sup> Rather, as Shoghi Effendi immediately adds, there have *always* been Prophets and Messengers.<sup>251</sup> In fact, the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá consistently assume an *indefinite* number of Manifestations.<sup>252</sup> Third, as Shoghi Effendi emphasizes, the mentioned religions do not represent the *only* true religions,<sup>253</sup> but – maybe similar to the methodological restraints mentioned thesis 3 – could be understood as the ones existing *as mentioned* in the Bahá’í writings.<sup>254</sup> This also derives from the fact that Bahá’u’lláh understands *all* religions to be divine in origin and nature.<sup>255</sup>

Yet, if one was tempted to assume any of these reductionisms – if the “nine” religions *were* to be taken literally – the “list” itself would demonstrates several grave flaws. To name just a few anomalies visible even from this reductionist outset: it would fail by suggesting that these different religious historical organisms were *one* (linear) chain of progressive revelations. These “nine” don’t form a simple timeline of progression, but imply parallel developments and crossings. Further, some of these religions are not named after a founder, actually have a founder, or attach to a figure that is the founder of the respective religion; they are religions in very different senses of the word.<sup>256</sup> Finally, such a literalism would also miss the symbolic and spiritual character of the named religions as “the only ones existing” and begin to resemble an exclusivist determination of “true” religions. Shoghi Effendi avoids this danger, first, by clarifying that the “nine” should not be used to create the impression “of being all tied up with peculiar religious theories” and, second, by advising Bahá’ís “not ... to be rigid in these matters,”<sup>257</sup> but rather to take into account the historical and scholarly discussion on the number and identity of (what should be called) “existing” religions. These are all also important insights in the conversation with Daoism.

Another complication arises if we take a closer look at other figures related to Manifestations, such as the Hebrew prophets, or holy figures in other religions, such as the apostles in Christianity or

the Imams in Shi'i Islam, as reflected in the Bábi-Bahá'í writings.<sup>258</sup> As not all accepted (known) Manifestations are founders of religions,<sup>259</sup> so do not all holy figures appear automatically in a lesser rank than that of Manifestations. It is well known that the Báb began his revelatory writings connected to his declaration as the Gate of the Qa'im, eternalized in his mighty book, the *Qayyum al-Asma*, by identifying himself *symbolically* with the figure of the Hebrew patriarch Joseph who according to the Qur'an was considered a High Prophet and one of the most important figures of the Jewish dispensation in Islamic understanding.<sup>260</sup> It is also well known that Bahá'u'lláh has, on occasion, identified the Báb with John the Baptizer who as Yahya was also a Qur'anic High Prophet with a book, that is, given Bahá'í criteria, a Manifestation.<sup>261</sup> Bahá'u'lláh also identifies the Joseph of the Báb with himself and with the third Shi'i Imam Husayn ibn 'Ali, both offering their lives in the wake of divine demonstration of unconditional love (at least in Bahá'u'lláh understanding).<sup>262</sup> On occasion, both Joseph and Imam Husayn appear in the same lineup with accepted Manifestations as if they were participating in this elevated station, but maybe only were anonymously manifest *as such* (Thesis 5).<sup>263</sup> In other words, the Bábi-Bahá'í writings know of a host of other (maybe in some sense anonymous) "Manifestations" of the divine besides Manifestations in a technical sense, often named the "holy ones," appearing in the series of Imams or the holy family, or in series of Manifestations, or with all their attributes in place of them, or even as identified with a named (known) Manifestation,<sup>264</sup> or occasionally name them as Manifestations.<sup>265</sup>

In this context, it is also remarkable that the Báb in his *Tafsir Hadith al-Haqiqat* (and other tablets) names Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the wife of the first Shi'i Imam 'Ali ibn Abu Talib, the *generative principle of all prophets* – a function that seems to indicate a "station" that is in some sense even higher than that of the prophets.<sup>266</sup> If we take also into account, as Henry Corbin has demonstrated, that the Shaykhi movement, which preceded the Báb and from which he recruited almost all of his early followers and "apostles," the Letters of the Living, has considered Fatimah as the representation of divine Wisdom, we are in a whole new world of religious and philosophical as well as spiritual connotations.<sup>267</sup> Wisdom, *hokmah* in biblical understanding, indicates not just one

divine attribute among infinitely many others, but is singled out as one of the divine modes of immanence of the transcendent God in the world of creation. In the Hebrew Bible she appears in an elevated position in her function to indicate the presence of God's Self in the world in the company of similarly elevated terms such as the Name (*haShem*), the Word (*dabar*), the Spirit (*ruah*), the Angel (*malek*), and Glory (*kabod*)<sup>268</sup> – many of them, individually and collectively, also being used to indicate divine Manifestations in the Bahá'í writings.<sup>269</sup> In the biblical context, Wisdom represents, among other things, the aspect of the presence of the unfathomable God as the plan of creation, the wise order and reasonability of creation in the mind of God; God's luring power, instead of coercive force, in the education of humanity in divine virtues; and the glory of God as she contracts herself in the tent of the covenant and wanders with the people as *shekinah*.<sup>270</sup> It is this Wisdom that the *Gospel of John* refers to in its famous prologue as *the Word (logos)* that was in the beginning of all creation, is in all creation, and *is* God.<sup>271</sup> It is the same Wisdom (*hikmat*) in which Bahá'u'lláh understands the world to be created; that in many of his tablets appears to indicate the nature of the Manifestations; and that allows us to understand creation as divine order and to penetrate its secrets with our mind (as its mirror).<sup>272</sup>

Nor does divine Wisdom figure only as the inspiration of prophets, but also of the sages and lovers of wisdom, that is, philosophers.<sup>273</sup> It is not without merit to point to the fact that in light of Wisdom both of these categories – that of the prophet and of the sage – appear at times fused in past scriptures *and* the Bahá'í writings. A strong witness to this fusion presents itself in the biblical and intertestamentary Wisdom literature, which is itself not only viewed as inspired scripture, but highlights Wisdom as divine Spirit and plays the role of inspiration of prophets<sup>274</sup> as well as that of the divine dimension, as identified in the figure of Christ.<sup>275</sup> Moreover, as part of the Wisdom section of Hebrew Scriptures, the *Book of Daniel* features one of the most influential Jewish prophets as a sage.<sup>276</sup> And Bahá'u'lláh identifies the symbolic figure of Hermes Trismegistus as the primordial exponent of philosophy, who was already traditionally thought to be the Jewish patriarch Enoch, the one exalted to God while alive,<sup>277</sup> while also being identified with the Islamic prophet Idris.<sup>278</sup> This will be further explored in thesis 7.



So, while one could hold that eastern religions tend to not entertain the concept of revelation and prophethood, but rather view their holy figures as sages and their insights as wisdom, one could also make a case that such sages *live from* the same Wisdom that generates the prophets as divine representatives. In this sense, Laozi could be understood as personification of this same Wisdom that flows through all prophets and holy figures regardless of their station as primal mirrors (thesis 3 and 5) or as mirrors of these mirrors (thesis 1 and 2).<sup>279</sup> In this perspective, it would be secondary to what the exact station of Laozi amounts *if* we accept that the *Laozi* is such a scripture of wisdom, shining with divine Wisdom (thesis 4); and even more so if we take into account the later Daoist interpretation of both the person and the book as Manifestations of ultimate reality (thesis 2). Yet, perhaps one may counter (and limit this thesis) by the fact that, in the Chinese context, if one does not follow the divinization of Lord Lao, Laozi is more naturally considered as a wisdom teacher than an “incarnation” of Wisdom.

## Thesis 7: Laozi is a “symbolic” Manifestation

This thesis is based on the observation, already hinted at, that not all of the Manifestations, named in the Bahá’í writings, are either founders of religions (thesis 6) or, for that matter, even historical figures (thesis 4). This is especially true for Krishna, who is accepted as a genuine Manifestation in the Bahá’í context,<sup>280</sup> but is neither a founder of Hinduism nor a historical figure, but probably similar to Laozi (thesis 4) a composite personality.<sup>281</sup> There are as many “Krishnas” in the Indian records of old as there are “Laozis” in the Chinese records. Similarly, we find series of Manifestations in Bábí-Bahá’í literatures that include figures such as the biblical Adam and Noah besides the already mentioned ones, and they were already included in the Qur’anic series of prophets leading up to Muhammad.<sup>282</sup> Similar to Fu Xi in the Chinese context (thesis 2), it is not difficult to agree that both Adam and Noah are not historical figures, but symbolic representations of the archetypal human condition in relation to (ultimate) reality at earlier stages of human development and consciousness.<sup>283</sup> Nevertheless, if such figures are included in valid lists of Manifestations, we must either conclude that Manifestations do not necessarily have to be historical figures or

that they will always at least have to indicate a great existential symbolism of divine revolution in the history of evolution and civilization.<sup>284</sup> In either case, history becomes not obsolete — such as in docetic renderings of the Christ event (recognizing only the archetype, but denying the scandal of particularity, embodiment and historicity)<sup>285</sup> — but remains the very *intention* of this symbolic reality as it emanates from the spiritual realms into their materializations, and repeatedly so.<sup>286</sup> In fact, with the return of one Manifestation “in” another one, the whole cyclical and progressive understanding of the symbolic “identity” of all Manifestations as expressions of the one Word, Wisdom, Glory, Mind, Will and Spirit of God becomes only intelligible if we assume such a symbolic reality as a profoundly spiritual Reality, as the very basis for any singular or cyclical or progressive materialization in history.<sup>287</sup>

Considering the symbolic character of the Manifestation as basis for any historization is *not* the same as making a mythological statement or transforming the concept of the Manifestation into a mythopoeic statement extracted from past religions. A mythological statement was meant to be (or was factually often misunderstood as) a *literal* rendering of an event of sacred history within the bounds of the causal connections of this material universe — something we would today consider literalism (thesis 6)<sup>288</sup> — even if it looks from a current perspective like a paradigmatic rendering of deep realities. The symbolic character of Reality, however, is related to the fact that the spiritual nature of its meaning cannot be exhausted by material, causal, space-time relations without, in this collapse, in its very meaning becoming irrelevant to them (that is, the literal facts created in such a way have already lost the spiritual meaning). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, with the Sufi tradition, speaks of the higher spiritual realm of the Kingdom (*malakut*) sometimes in terms of the realm of similitudes (*alam al-mithal*), the realm of symbols, meanings, similarities, images, and significances, which are aspects of a higher reality than the fleeing causal realm of impermanence, but which are mutually immanent with and must be materialized and historicized at the plane of the physical, historical, temporal, spatial and bodily world.<sup>289</sup> He also relates many doctrines of past religions to have been misunderstood as “mythological” truths, that is, as *literal* renderings of spiritual realities by confounding them with happenings of this causal realm of the physical universe. Instead, these stories of sacred

history were, so ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, always meant to convey symbolic patterns of *spiritual* realities in the midst, but not of the stuff, of physical realities.<sup>290</sup> It is their symbolism, not their mythopoetic confusion, which transports religious truths through symbols, myths, tales, which, in their spiritual nature, have the power to connect us with the divine revelation of Reality, or rather *are* the emanations of this Reality into the world of creation.

A good example of this difference between mythic illusion and symbolic meaning, or spiritual reality, in the Bahá’í writings is the appearance of Hermes Trismegistus and “his” writings, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in Bahá’u’lláh’s *Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-Hikmat)*. Hermes is, according to contemporary historical readings, (like Laozi) considered a composite figure, not a historical person (thesis 4) – although sometimes (mythopoetic, literalist) historicity was assumed, as in the Renaissance. Like Krishna and Laozi, he “manifests” at different times in history, collecting himself to, and collectively emanating, characteristics of an archetypal figure of (philosophic) wisdom *and* of divine revelation. He represents the Egyptian God Thoth, the originator of scripture and language, and the Greek Hermes, the messenger of the revelations of the Greece pantheon, but also the Hebrew and Jewish figure of Enoch, who was supposed to have been assumed into the divine realm while alive. Hermes/Thoth/Enoch later also lent “their” name to this culminating *Corpus*, of scriptural and para-scriptural texts of apocalyptic nature,<sup>291</sup> carrying “his” name, and advanced par excellence to the figure through whose mystical ascent into the presence of God its secrets were authorized.<sup>292</sup> And, finally, in Islamic lore “he” became identified with the mysterious Qur’anic prophet Idris who was also already equated with the biblical Enoch (thesis 6).<sup>293</sup> The *Corpus Hermeticum* is, of course, not an ancient text of those pre-historical figures, but was probably accumulated not earlier than the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., although the ascription to Hermes and Enoch lets it appear to have been created at the beginning of human civilization. Its enormous impact was not only due to its assumed old age and the authorship of this presumably exceptional holy figure of divine origin or touch, but can also be explained by the variability with which the presumed authorship (and authority) could be identified with figures from different cultures, embracing a divinity, a prophet, a philosopher, and a revealer of divine truth in its sphere.<sup>294</sup>

Comparing Laozi with Hermes, at this point, we can decide to dissolve Laozi like Hermes/Enoch/Idris into irrelevant clouds of mythological confusion or view them as actual philosophers, or actual prophets of old, or, conversely, in the contemporary climate of “demythologization,” as imaginations based on a fraud of a later generation ascribing an old name with authority to a respective corpus of writings that, nevertheless, stun us even today because of their beauty and depth of insight. Over against all of these potential solutions, we could *also* decide to follow Bahá’u’lláh’s view of Hermes and understand Laozi, like Hermes/Enoch/Idris, as such a *symbolic* “Manifestation” of an ideal prophet-philosopher, educator, and revealer of Wisdom – conveying spiritual archetypical Reality regardless of the folds that formed the cooperate identity of the figure through which this reality shines as Sun of Truth (thesis 3 and 6).

Furthermore, the fused figure of a prophet-philosopher (thesis 6), whether symbolic or historical (or at least as perceived in sacred history), is not an unusual category of human societies to understand their extraordinary figures to be relevant across diverse cultures. Historical figures like Pythagoras were considered not only philosophers (and scientists), but spiritual giants, gathering religious communities among themselves, being quintessential human beings, incarnations of Wisdom and knowledge, and even divine figures. So could the Roman poet Ovid divinize Pythagoras as all-knowing sage of universal, super-mundane wisdom.<sup>295</sup> Insofar as other philosophers are understood – traditionally in Islam and also by Bahá’u’lláh – spiritually to have gained their wisdom from the prophets, such as Pythagoras from disciples of Salomon, for instance,<sup>296</sup> and vice versa, and insofar as such philosophers can be understood as being inspired, as Bahá’u’lláh suggests for Socrates,<sup>297</sup> we can discern the same pattern: Wisdom flows from divine Wisdom that/who in all prophets constitutes their “person,” who, therefore, are her highest incarnations, but of a Wisdom that/who also distributes herself among (or is being mirrored in) other extraordinary figures of holiness, mystical insight (*irfan*), philosophical reason and spiritual wisdom. Laozi, considered as divine personification of Wisdom, is no exception – whether he was a composite personality, a (symbolic or historical) divine mirror, a holy sage or Wisdom’s “Manifestation.”

## Thesis 8: Laozi's station is (now) irrelevant

As with every Manifestation in the context of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation we can, on this view, assume that they all have been integrated in their greatness into the greatness of Bahá'u'lláh who is called a "universal Manifestation," unprecedented in human history on earth until now (and maybe never seen before even in unrecorded human pre-history).<sup>298</sup> Consequently, whatever the exact station of anyone of any dispensation – even if such a station seem to lower from one dispensation to another, as in the case of John the Baptizer, or changes into divinity over time, as in the case of Krishna, the Buddha, Jesus, and Laozi (thesis 6)<sup>299</sup> – has become irrelevant in light of the newest Manifestation; the past has been made new.<sup>300</sup> It is in line with this pattern of thought that the Báb, the more he gradually revealed his claim to that of a Manifestation, also granted outrageously grades of divinity to his disciples,<sup>301</sup> while Bahá'u'lláh, conversely, by his declaration to be the coming of the One God Shell Make Manifest (*man yaziruhu'llah*) – whom the Báb expected being even greater as the Bab himself,<sup>302</sup> the Manifestation in which *all* religions flow together (again) – resumed all distributed divinity back into the singular universal event of his appearance. It is in this event that the whole world was created anew by a divine infusion with all the divine attributes, with grace, mercy, forgiveness, and renewal.<sup>303</sup> Symbolically, that is, considered as spiritual reality (thesis 7), with the coming of a new Manifestation all creatures expire, are inhaled, as it were, and are, out of this moment of divine inhalation of the Spirit and into silence, exhaled again, recreated. Through this event, all reality is being born again into a new process that erases all ancient stations and recreates them anew in unexpected ways into unprecedented forms.<sup>304</sup> If in the new revelation on the spiritual level only the "face" of God remains, that is, the primordial Manifestation resuming all reality, then its symbolic re-presentation is always such that it does not matter what anyone's station was before its new appearance, except it is newly defined by its relation to this novel event by which all is recreated.<sup>305</sup> All stations, even of all past Manifestations, are, therefore, in a sense redefined by the new event of a universal Manifestation. On this view, it does not really matter what station Laozi has had.<sup>306</sup> It is in the connection that one finds to Bahá'u'lláh in which one may also find Laozi's relevance today, reverberating through his *Dao De Jing* in new splendor. "Now is the

time,” says ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*when we restrict our discussion to the Most Great Luminary of Peace and Salvation in the Age, to talk of the Blessed Perfection and to voice His exhortations, behests and teachings. ... [The] sovereignty [of former Manifestation] in this world is ended and their cycle is completed*” [SWAB 469].

## 11. The Dao of Bahá

In conclusion, what is the challenge of Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* for the Bahá’í universe of discourse? Sure, we might have enough to work through with the host of diverse correspondences and differences in detail as developed up to this point — such as the resonances in the understanding of the unmanifest and hidden as well as the manifest and creative ultimate divine reality; the relativity of (religious) truths; the striving for education and perfection of human potential in light of this ultimate reality and its exemplars; the effort to liberate us from empty repetition of traditions and manipulations of social and psychological dependences; the mutual resonances of the respective Manifestations of Reality/ Dao in wise and prophetic figures; and the effort to reform human society in light of the whole of humanity and with universal peace as aim, among others. Yet, a maybe even deeper dimension of fruitful cross-pollination may come to light only if we reformulate the assumption regarding the unity of religions, which was underlying the whole conversation all along, namely: in form of a reflection on the one universal Dao of all religions as the Dao of *bahá*, of the latest Manifestation of the Dao, of ultimate Reality in “person.”

If the many books and reflections beginning with “the Dao of...”<sup>307</sup> have brought something to light, then it is the insistence on a certain shift of our perception of reality as a whole, a shift of the worldview, the cosmology that is more often than not tacitly presupposed in our day by day evaluation of our lives and in some sense or another underlies any philosophical and religious discourse, and so also the ones reflected on here. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has made this insight the basis of his philosophical investigations<sup>308</sup> so that by knitting together the major spheres of thought (science, religion and philosophy)<sup>309</sup> he could programmatically proclaim: “Science suggested a cosmology; and whatever suggests a cosmology, suggest a religion.”<sup>310</sup> The emphasis in

such a correlation and mutual induction of these spheres on the level of a cosmology, whether implicit or as a reflected worldview of any scientific and religious discourse and their mutual integrations, is to recognize not only the unity of humanity and religions (with its/their Manifestations) in the unity of God. The true nature of unity as envisioned by the Dao of Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* is of encompassing cosmological breadth that intends nothing less than the unity of the *whole* “body of the world”<sup>311</sup> as pervaded by the one divine Spirit that vivifies the universe in a process of the emergence of mind and the various evolutionary harmonizations of its members throughout all of its spheres and layers of existence.<sup>312</sup> The Dao, then, translated in Bahá’í terms, is this all-embracing and all-pervading Reality of the Spirit, the working of its essence in all of nature, including elementary particles, living beings and humanity.<sup>313</sup> This one Spirit pervades the *All* of cosmic reality.<sup>314</sup> To see in the diversity of cosmic existence this unity of beauty and the evolving force of unification<sup>315</sup> is to feel or see or experience or perceive or inherit the unseen and unnamed Dao/Reality, and is to become a mirror of its all-pervasive working.<sup>316</sup> Human perfection, then, lies not in the flight from the world of nature, but in the realization of all divine attributes, which are seeking realization in *all* of existence,<sup>317</sup> not only among humanity and society, but also in all of nature, our precious Earth and the cosmos as a whole. The Dao is this inner nature (*ziran*) that unites *all* of existence, physical and mental, subjective and objective, individual and collective, personal and social, visible and invisible, sacred and profane, material and spiritual, and is always already present and at work in the process of becoming, the becoming of new worlds and new spiritual beings, even beyond humanity.<sup>318</sup> Yet, of course, as practitioners of Daoism can and will claim their own understanding of these matter, historically, philosophically, and religiously – and especially in the context of Chinese self-identity, which does not so much discern between the “Three Traditions” than identify with them – these references for a contemporary Bahá’í perception, reception and dialogue will remain in flux.<sup>319</sup>

It is, then, in this wide view of cosmic unity in which the Dao of Laozi reclaims a “face” in the “Dao” of Bahá’u’lláh. In this universal, evolutionary, ecological Dao, universal Reality (the primal Manifestation of the apophatic Reality/God/Truth) becomes, indeed,

relative in all of its happenings and truths/*daos* far beyond particular religions, even particular spiritual beings, such as humanity; it becomes relative to all sentient beings beyond humanity (as in Buddhism); and it becomes implicitly always already related to the whole of existence as one process of divine Reality or Realization.<sup>320</sup> In this universal *ecological* model of unity, the Dao speaks for all beings and in all beings with one voice, a univocity of infinitely many voices.<sup>321</sup> In a *pluralism of all beings* on their respective levels of intensity of the flow of the one Most Great Spirit,<sup>322</sup> “its” Manifestations give voice to this univocity “in person.”<sup>323</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, chs. 1, 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*. Dordrecht, NL: Springer 2006, 1-32.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Eva Wong, *Taoism: An Essential Guide*. Boston: Shambala, 1997, ch. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> As we will see later, in section 10, this claim must be relativized in relation to its historical accuracy, as it the circumstances for the identity the person and the becoming of the book are quite complicated.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Alan Watts, *What is Dao?* Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000, 36.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Dann May, “The Bahá’í Principle of Religious Unity,” in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá’í Theology*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 1-36.
- <sup>7</sup> Although a wider shamanic religiosity may have been pervasive throughout the different pre-historic cultural areas, the emergence of Chinese religions or Daoic religiosity is not in any direct way dependent on the Indian and South Asian or Dharmic traditions and in its origins and further developments always demonstrates its own unique characteristics. Nevertheless, in the later confluence of these streams of religious universes diverse daoic schools and religious expressions, Daoism among them, with Indian Buddhism has led to transferences of categories and mutual synergies such as have contributed to the appearance of Chan and Zen Buddhism and other confluences of the Dao with philosophical and religious connotations in these encounters. Cf. Ray Grigg, *The Tao of Zen*. Edison, NJ: Alva Press, 1994. More will be said in sections 8 and 10.



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- <sup>8</sup> Cf. 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.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Seena Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations," in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 137-152. This integration must, as all other unifications in the context of the understanding of "unity" in the Bahá'í writings, be seen in the tension between indelible uniqueness (*'ahad*) and inclusiveness (*wahid*); cf. Rhett Diessner, *Psyche and Eros: Bahá'í Studies in a Spiritual Psychology*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2007, ch. 1. This oscillation between uniqueness and embracing unification is also enshrined in Shoghi Effendi's two formulations: first, "unity in diversity," which must not ever be misunderstood as uniformity, and second, the "complementarity" of religions in their contribution to the one history of religions; but even more so in the fact that the one religion, of which the Bahá'í Faith understands itself as a part, is an ongoing, always self-transcending process beyond any religion, even the Bahá'í Faith. Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette: IL, Bahá'í Publishing, 1993, sections "Unity in Diversity" and "Fundamental Principle of Religious Truth." For the philosophical and transreligious implications, cf. Roland Faber, *The Divine Manifold*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, *passim*.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1911*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2011, #14.
- <sup>11</sup> This will have a great deal to do with the mystical consciousness that unites us with the unknowable mystery beyond; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. Translated by Marzieh Gail. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1991, 91. In the Fourth Valley (of the *Four Valleys*) we read: "If the mystic knowers be of those who have reached to the beauty of the Beloved One (*Maḥbúb*), this station is the apex of consciousness and the secret of divine guidance." This consciousness will also lead us into the heart of the *Dao De Jing*.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Phyllis Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1993.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963. While this influence of the *Dao de Jing* has created worldwide presence, this article will, of course, not claim to understand the historical situation of its becoming and transmission, especially in China and throughout Chinese culture and the "Chinese religions," but will especially take into account the scholarly engagement with it, its history and becoming, as well as its contemporary interpretations in light of interreligious and cross-cultural philosophical discourses, which have taken place after its western academic reception,

but also the contemporary interreligious interest accompanying the interest in its content and meaning.

- <sup>14</sup> Bahá'u'lláh uses the term *haykal* as embodiment of divine presence, which can assume the form of a literal or symbolic temple, the human body; or it indicates the heart, which is the place of divine revelation and presence in creatures. Revelation can, therefore, take the form of an embodied person or/and a “book,” that is, the prophet and his or her book. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Days of Remembrance: Selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh for the Bahá'í Holy Days*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2016, #40:6: “O night of the All-Bountiful! In thee do We verily behold the Mother Book. Is it a Book, in truth, or rather a child begotten?”
- <sup>15</sup> Regarding such a *transreligious* notion of “revelation,” cf. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, parts 2 and 3. The term “Big Five” has come into use as many introductions of religion or investigations into specific religious matters related to “world religions” have often reduced their view, or concentrated on, these five religions, often to the exception of other traditions. While the Bahá'í writings firmly add Zoroastrianism and the mysterious Sabian/Sabaeen religion(s), some introductions widen their horizon to Jainism and Sikhism or, in rare cases, even to the Bahá'í Faith. Cf. George Chryssides and Ron Geaves, *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, ch. 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 1970, 94-96; Christopher Buck, “A Unique Eschatological Interface: Bahá'u'lláh and Cross-Cultural Messianism,” in Peter Smith, ed., *In Iran: Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*. Vol. 3. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986, 157-180.
- <sup>17</sup> While section 10 of this article will wrestle with this questions, it should be clear from the outset that answering this question either in the affirmative or negative would not have any influence on the value of Daoism, Laozi, and the *Dao De Jing* as philosophical and religious entities, or better, a living organism and its importance for the future of religions in their philosophical and religious expressions. However, as will be seen later, I will not even intend to “answer” this question in any simple way, but rather take the uniqueness of their contributions to world-philosophies and -religions as a mirror for *differentiating the question* and harvesting the insights gained by doing so for the Bahá'í universe of discourse. Hence, my title-question, whether Laozi is a “lost prophet” must not be misunderstood as presupposing that he necessarily *is* a prophet (in anyone’s eyes), but as a question that addresses the interest of the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation of God in the context of another religion. While it may be true that such a claim—to prophethood—is not an inherent necessity or even a real possibility in the context of eastern religions, it should, therefore, not be summed that the

Abrahamic institution and notion of “prophethood” is merely applied by asking this question. Rather, if we substitute, as the reverse is sometimes the case in Bahá’í parlour, the word “prophet” with Manifestation (*mazhar-i ilahí*), we immediately have left this limitation.

- <sup>18</sup> Of course, in the first place, the engagement with Daoism, as with any other religion, in the Bahá’í context is a fascinating and rewarding quest and an imperative, given the presupposition of the Bahá’í axiom of the unity of all religions. Yet, as imperative, it is always also a challenge as the details of such a “unity” will be of revealing and enriching nature, even if we might not immediately “see” how differences and unison are to be understood or (in an intellectually satisfying and spiritually gratifying way) achieved. It is in this sense, that the Bahá’í imperative of unity is an even stronger impulse to reflection than the usual interreligious engagements of comparative religion, comparative theology, or interreligious dialogues; cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures—An Extended Version*. New York: Orbis Books, 2016.
- <sup>19</sup> In general, the different magnitudes of the presence of diverse religions in the Bahá’í writings must be understood from the historical fact and hermeneutical principle of the (historical and geographical) “location” of any event, such as a new religion, like the Bábi-Bahá’í religions, as it will harbor inherent limitations of access and understanding of hearers and listeners to its new revelation in any given context. As Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explain, their references to divers religions were not only related to the ability of their audience to understand, but also by the religious adherence and context of questions and questioners present and inquiring, which/whom they often answered with their books, tablets and letters. This is also a *liberating* insight, as it is not the limitations of the Manifestations that define the language and references they use to explain their revelations, but the limitations of the time and place in which they appear; hence, the meaning of their teachings and the categories they use must not be reduced to these contexts either, but can and must be translated into new contexts; cf. Momen, “Bahá’í Approach,” in Momen, *Bahá’í Faith*, 167-188.
- <sup>20</sup> The one specific reference of Shoghi Effendi to Laozi and how to understand him in the Bahá’í context will become the driving impulse of section 10 where it is quoted, and the analysis of which will take up all of the latter third of this article.
- <sup>21</sup> It should be mentioned at this point that the references of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Chinese religion or religions (such as Buddhism and Confucianism) can and should also be understood as signifying and, hence, implying Daoism so that they are relevant to its discussion. This is even more so of importance as in the Chinese context, as we will see later, the

differentiation between the religious traditions, especially Daoism, Confucianism, Chinese forms of Buddhism, and the so called “folk religion,” are less of importance than the Chinese identity that they together express in their relation to China as unified, or confluent, spiritual heritage.

- <sup>22</sup> With the sparse sources in this regard, we are in a similar situation as with considerations regarding the possibility of Native American “prophets” or Manifestations; cf. Christopher Buck, “Native Messengers of God in Canada? A test case for Bahá’í universalism,” in *The Bahá’í Studies Review* 6 (1996): 97-133; C. Buck, “Bahá’í Universalism and Native Prophets,” in Seena Fazel and John Danesh, eds., *Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Bahá’í Thought*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2002, 173-201.
- <sup>23</sup> This caveat holds all the more in light of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that *all* religions are not just creatures of human imagination, but of divine revelation; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1976, #111. One might also think of the religion of the Sabians/Sabeans, of which we do not only not know any founder, but of which we also cannot even be sure what group it identifies (many are suggested in historical research). What is even more, in Islamic interreligious discourses, their name functions often as means to integrate other religions, such as Buddhism, into the sphere of divine guidance. Cf. Christopher Buck, “The Identity of the Sabi’un: An Historical Quest,” in *The Muslim World* 74:3-4 (1984): 172-186.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. SAQ #43.
- <sup>25</sup> Shoghi Effendi has clarified that Confucius is not signified a Manifestation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; cf. Helen Bassett Hornby, *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File*. New Deli: Bahá’í Publishing, 2010, #1685. Yet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, #43, in the same section, states Confucius together with the Buddha as claimed by “worshipers,” which would suggest a religion, not an ethics. And in another context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions Confucius in one series of names together with *only* other founders of religions such that Confucius would be the only one captured by the term “blessed souls,” which binds all of them together, to be (grammatically oddly) excluded from the series. Besides, although not authoritative, pilgrim notes exist in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answers the question whether Confucius was a Manifestation affirmatively. But the point, here, is not to decide whether there are conflictual statements or to establish a hermeneutics that would resolve such questions on a chain of authority, but to hint at the fact that these questions need not necessarily be answered with the most simple explanations; rather, they are worth to be thought through in their ambivalences, complexities, and hidden folds, as section 10 will attempt.

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- <sup>26</sup> The other equally important person and text being (the) *Zhuhangzi* (the person and the book) to which I will not refer here further, but who/which would be important to add to complete the picture or, at least, to see the development of (philosophical) Daoism more clearly and fully. Cf. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968; Victor Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994. Recent research also indicates that there may be even older texts on which both the *Dao De Jing* on which might depend; cf. Harold Roth, *Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- <sup>27</sup> The textual history of Daoism is more complicated, as it comprises a whole universe of texts that, later, were understood as scriptural basis of religious Daoist identity. And it cannot be claimed that any of the early texts has already settled into a fixed identity by which it would be possible anachronistically to differentiate diverse religions as mutually stable identities. They are rather differentiating "schools" of thought, spirituality, and ceremonials, more than (independent or mutually exclusive) religions; cf. Livia Kohn, *The God of Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000, chs. 1-2.
- <sup>28</sup> This approach, one of *possibilities*, or a *multiplicity of potential* answers, is not only meant to address the question directed toward Laozi alone, but rather to open a space in which complex considerations regarding the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestations of God in relation to *all* religions can be raised and pondered, but, here, as triggered by the unique profile of Daoism, especially in the mirror of the *Dao De Jing* and the figure of Laozi, that otherwise might not easily come to the surface or could go unreflected. For a similar, but much wider field of considerations regarding the concept of Manifestation in light of a multiplicity of religions, cf. R. Faber, *The Garden of Reality: Transreligious Relativity in a World of Becoming*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, ch. 7-8.
- <sup>29</sup> Cf. Wong, *Taoism*, chs. 1-3. For early forms and groups, cf. Gil Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism: Creation of Tradition*, New York: Routledge, 2011.
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. Terry Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities*, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016.
- <sup>31</sup> Cf. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Georg Herrmann, eds., *Plato and the Poets*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. J. J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformation of Taoist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000, ch. 3.
- <sup>33</sup> Cf. Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, *The Shambala Dictionary of Taoism*. Translated by Werner Wünsche. Boston, MA: Shambala, 1996, 176.

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- <sup>34</sup> Cf. John Blofeld, *Taoism: The Road to Immortality*. Boston, MA: Shambala, 2000, chs. 5-7.
- <sup>35</sup> Cf. Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 1-24. As we will see later, the same is true for the entanglement of Daoist schools and strains with that of Confucian and Buddhist provenience, philosophically as well as religiously, which created a fascinating rhizome of interactions and mutual coinherences.
- <sup>36</sup> Cf. Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, chs. 2-3. Smith has demonstrated that for the study of religion the term religion is a fairly new and late term, used to categorize mostly western sensitivities on the basis of the Enlightenment and modern secular differentiations of spheres of living such as culture, society, economy, and so on. It was also used to imperialistically capture other spiritual paths either for missionary reasons or subordination under a specific tradition, preeminently Christianity, as the peak and essence of religion. Many scholars have, therefore, tried to avoid this term as description of spiritual ways in order to withhold its prejudicial prescriptive implications as well as the unspoken presupposition that there is an already defined essence of religion(s) that needs only to be applied while, in fact, it was gathered from a specific tradition and projected onto others. Cf. John Cobb, "Some Whiteheadian Assumptions about Religion and Pluralism," in David Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2005, ch. 12. Exceptions, however, arise historically with Manichaeism and Islam, as both of them use the term religion (*din*) self-reflectively; cf. Smith, *Meaning*, ch. 4. For Bahá'u'lláh's reconceptualization of "religion" in light of this Islamic and pre-Islamic stream from its much more spiritual origin in Zoroastrian texts, cf. Kamran Ekbal, "Daéna-Dén-Dín: The Zoroastrian Heritage of the 'Maid of Heaven' in the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh," in Moojan Momen, ed., *Scripture and Revelation: Papers presented at the First Irfan Colloquium*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1997.
- <sup>37</sup> The relation between religion and philosophy is an ancient problem and widely discussed where "revelation" becomes the discerning mark of religions. But if we change our perspective and seek the transformative character of a teaching, as ancient Greek philosophy did (versus a purely intellectual endeavor), we will find the difference harder to establish. Ancient philosophers were sages, as sages were often religious figures, as for instance evidenced by Pythagoras. Hence Laozi was not considered merely an intellectual figure, but a transformative force of living a spiritual life. Cf. Yu-Lan Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy: A Systematic Account of Chinese Thought from its Origins to the Present Day*. NY: Free Press, 1948, chs. 1-2. For further discussion, cf. section 10.

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- <sup>38</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, #132; Seena Fazel, "Religious Pluralism and the Bahá'í Faith," in *Interreligious Insight* 1:3 (2003): 42- 49.
- <sup>39</sup> It would seem that this approach is a natural implication and extension of Shoghi Effendi's insight that the oneness of religions does not hinder their differences in the sense of a relational complementarity; Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1996, #I. For such a complementarity to be actually of some value, it can only evoke insights if the content brought into complimentary conversation is not already a priori known and included in one's own horizon, such that even the assumed "completeness" of one's own scriptures and wisdom path does not reveal such insights if they are not accepted as a gift of that particular tradition—as an aspect of truth that in fact adds to insight; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #15. This is a major problem in interreligious discourses, related to the differentiation between certain forms of inclusivism (that my truth supersedes and fulfills all others) and pluralism (that there is mutual enrichment); cf. Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999.
- <sup>40</sup> The later development of Daoism, however, will in some sense open up to the idea of "revelation," for instance, in the movement of Zhang Daoling of the second century C.E., who claimed to have received *revelations* from Laozi, and on which revelations the important sect of the Celestial Masters is based; cf. Clarke, *Tao*, 33; Fischer-Schreiber, *Dictionary*, 9-10; Robinet, *Taoism*, ch. 3.
- <sup>41</sup> Chew, *Religions*, 196.
- <sup>42</sup> Yet, it is in no way clear that these categories, that of the philosopher, the sage, the holy figure, and the prophet, cannot also intersect in a west-Asian (Abrahamic) context. Pythagoras, for instance, was, in his time, rather a religious leader than a philosopher in the modern sense. Note that Bahá'u'lláh in his *Tablet of Wisdom* considers Apollonius of Tyana, who seem to have been received as a holy figure in his time, even as a counter-example to Jesus, as a Greek messiah of sort, rather than a philosopher; cf. Keven Brown, "Hermes Trismegistos and Apollonius of Tyana in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh." In Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology*. Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 153-188. And Bahá'u'lláh even mentions Hermes Trismegistos, who in Islamic lore was already identified with the Qur'anic prophet Idris, and the Hebrew patriarch Enoch, as the originator of philosophy; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1994, 148n3. And then there is Socrates, whom Bahá'u'lláh not only mentions as an exceptional philosopher, but as a divinely inspired holy man of Truth; *ibid*, 147—as

there is also a long tradition that seems to imply the worthiness of Socrates to compared with Jesus. More is said in section 10.

<sup>43</sup> Yet, in this sense, the sage is the representation of perfect humanity; cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, *Source Book*, 761. Hence, the sage seems to embody ideals of the “revelation” of ultimate rightness in the cosmos as a whole, not unlike certain prophetic figures in the west-Asian religions of Abrahamic flavor as well as the “Perfect Man” tradition in diverse Jewish, Gnostic, Christian, and Islamic philosophical speculations; cf. Frederick Borsch, *The Son of Man in Myth and History*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967, chs. 2-6; Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, 131-133. Here again seems to appear a transreligious connection to the Bahá’í notion of Manifestation (*mazhar-i Ilahí*); cf. Juan Ricardo Cole, “The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá’í Writings,” in *Bahá’í Studies* 9 (1982) @ [http://bahai-library.com/cole\\_concept\\_manifestation](http://bahai-library.com/cole_concept_manifestation).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, 82-83.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Wong, *Taoism*, 31-37.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Wong, *Taoism*, 37-41; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, ch. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, passim. With the divinization of Laozi in the late Han dynasty—Robinet, *Taoism*, xviv fixes the date at 166 C.E.—Laozi is depicted as creator of the universe, and he is elevated to the highest depiction of ultimate reality by being admitted into it in the form of the Three Pure Ones; cf.; Clarke, *Tao*, 67-68; Blofeld, *Taoism*, 95; *Taoism*, Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, ch. 6. See further discussion in section 10.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Faber, *Garden*, Prologue, chs. 3, 8; John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> If we compare the Dao less with the particulars of the Greek, Jewish, and Christian Logos tradition, which leans itself more to controlled order, even if it is related to reason, as in Stoicism and Philo of Alexandria, but with the Wisdom tradition as represented with the biblical and intertestamentary books of *Proverbs*(ch. 8) or *Wisdom of Salomon*(ch. 7), we may begin to understand better the existing subliminal transreligious relations between east and west, that is, the prophetic and wisdom oriented religions, as Wisdom operates by attraction, not by force, not even that of logic, and as Wisdom embodies itself in the sages as well as in the prophets; cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, ch. 2; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament*



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*Inquiry into the Origins of the doctrine of the Incarnation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996, chs. 6-7. See further discussions in section 10.

- <sup>50</sup> Cf. Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Tao: An Introduction into the Heart of Taoism through the Authentic Tao De Ching and the Inner Teachings of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, ch. 1. This is also in line with the fact that early Chinese religion(s) were differentiated more in terms of schools than denominations, and important texts were often shared between all of them, although their value in those schools might have been different.
- <sup>51</sup> Cf. Wong, *Taoism*, ch. 6.
- <sup>52</sup> Alan Watts, *What is Tao?* Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000, 37-38.
- <sup>53</sup> Cf. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 68-71.
- <sup>54</sup> Cf. Chan, *Source Book*, chs. 6-7. That this is not just a western interpretation of the Dao can be witnessed by the considerations of the Chinese scholar Meijun Wang, "Conviviality with Dao: A Chinese Perspective," in Roland Faber and Santiago Slabodsky, eds., *Living Traditions and Universal Conviviality: Prospects and Challenges for Peace in Multireligious Communities*. Edited by. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016, 67-78.
- <sup>55</sup> Cf. Fung, *History*, 97; Robinet, *Taoism*, 26.
- <sup>56</sup> Cf. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, ch. 6.
- <sup>57</sup> Cf. Blofeld, *Taoism*, 1-19; Watts, *Tao*, 41-41.
- <sup>58</sup> Cf. Chan, *Source Book*, 136-137.
- <sup>59</sup> Cf. Robinet, *Meditation*, 42-48.
- <sup>60</sup> Cf. Fung, *Source Book*, 94-97; Cf. Phyllis Chew, "The Great Tao," in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4:2 (1991): 11-39.
- <sup>61</sup> Jonathan Star, *Tao Te Ching: The Definite Edition*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001, #1.
- <sup>62</sup> Cf. Rob Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, ch. 3.
- <sup>63</sup> Cf. Stephen Lambden, Introduction to *The Lawh-i haqq/Lawh al-Haqq (Tablet of Truth/True One/Ultimately Real...)* @ <http://hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/378/>.
- <sup>64</sup> Instead of setting up the world in opposites (in permanent conceptual strive for superiority), the Dao categorizes everything fluently as contrasts in mutual immanence and of a flow into one another; cf. Clarke, *Tao*, ch. 8. The unknowability and essential hiddenness of the Dao, even to the extent to call it "nothing" (*wu*) or "true nothingness" (*zhen wu*)—cf.

Robinet, *Taoism*, 194-195—is a great example of non-dual thinking, which also characterizes Bahá'u'lláh's understanding of Reality (*al-haqq*) beyond differentiations of theism and monism, but also beyond even the simple opposition between being and nothingness; cf. Roland Faber, "Baha'u'llah and the Luminous Mind: Baha'i Gloss on a Buddhist Puzzle," in *Lights of Irfan* 18 (2017): 53-106.

- <sup>65</sup> For more conversation between the mystical dimension of the Dao, its activation in the multiplicity of the world(s) and our Selves, and the Bahá'í writings; cf. Faber, *Garden*, ch. 3.
- <sup>66</sup> In the reflection of Chinese history of thought and culture, one might even say that without the *Dao De Jing*, the authorship of which is credited to the legendary Laozi, Chinese civilization would not have been the same or dramatically different; cf. Chan, *Source Book*, 136.
- <sup>67</sup> Cf. Olivia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, eds., *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, chs. 1-3.
- <sup>68</sup> Laozi is a title rather than a name, meaning Old Master. It may refer to a wise man with the name (Li) Erh and also, in Daoist and Confucian literature, Lao Tan; cf. Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 6-10.
- <sup>69</sup> Cf. Ellen Chen, *The Tao De Ching: A New Translation with Commentary*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1989, 6-18.
- <sup>70</sup> Cf. Fischer-Schreiber, *Dictionary*, 88-90; Robinet, *Taoism*, 19, 26.
- <sup>71</sup> Cf. Chen, *Tao De Ching*, 16-17; Chew, *Religions*, 24-25; Fischer-Schreiber, *Dictionary*, 89.
- <sup>72</sup> Cf. Jaspers, Karl, *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. 2: *The Original Thinkers: Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plotinus, Lao-tzu, Nagarjuna*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966. Jaspers adds also Zhuangzi, Liezi, Elijah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah, Homer, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, among others, to the axial list, indicating this awakening to be one especially of consciousness, not of narrow religious (revelatory) or even only western emergences; cf. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*. New York: Routledge, 2010, 8, 278-279 n5 (of p. 53), ch. 5.
- <sup>73</sup> This mutual interference and development of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism is known as the "3 Traditions" approach; cf. Clarke, *Tao*, 22-28.
- <sup>74</sup> Cf. Diane Morgan, *The Best Guide to Eastern Philosophy and Religion*. New York: renaissance Books, 2001, 223; C. Alexander and Annellen Simpkins, *Simple Taoism: A Guide to Living in Balance*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1999, 11.
- <sup>75</sup> Cf. Fischer-Schreiber, *Dictionary*, 56-57, 90; Morgan, *Guide*, 225.
- <sup>76</sup> This extraordinary crossing of lines by Bahá'u'lláh was not totally unknown in other religious contexts. One may think of the integration of

the Zoroastrian king Cyrus as Jewish Messiah in Isaiah 45 into Jewish salvation history; or the “Old Testament,” integrating the Jewish Hebrew Bible into Christian scripture; or the critical confluence of Islam and Hinduism in Sikhism. But the maybe closest predecessor of the idea of multi-religious prophethood was the figure of Mani whose movement became a “world religion” stretching from the Levant to China and Japan for over a thousand years before Bahá’u’lláh claimed the integration of all religions and to be the “return” of all Manifestations of the past in his prophethood; cf. Buck, “Interface,” 157-160. In fact, Mani claimed to be the return not only of Jesus, but also that of Zoroaster and the Buddha; cf. Smith, *Meaning*, 93.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, chs. 2, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Moojan Momen, *Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1990, 5-11.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Arvind Sharma, “Buddhism met Hinduism: Interaction and Influence in India,” in Arvind Sharma, ed., *The World's Religions: A Contemporary Reader*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, 234-40; Roland Faber, “‘Must ‘religion’ always remain as a synonym for ‘hatred?’”: Whiteheadian Meditations on the Future of Togetherness,” in Faber and Slabodsky, *Living Traditions*, 167-82.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Sours, *The Station and Claims of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1997, ch. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 10.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, 24.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Chan, *Source Book*, 36-41, 430-431.

<sup>84</sup> The *Dao De Jing* is situated in the time of warring local states against one another and should be read as a profound criticism of the political barbarism this situation implied. Hence, it lays out a political philosophy of harmony that, if realized, would indicate the ideal of civilization that the myth from the deliberate choice of Laozi for exile emphasizes as being impossible to be established; cf. Wong, *Taoism*, ch. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*. Vol 6/2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 85-93.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 10-12; Chew, *Religions*, 24; Fischer-Schreiber, *Dictionary*, 88.

<sup>87</sup> It is an “anthology”: cf. Alan Chan, “Laozi,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (5/2/2013), ch. 4 @ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/#TexTra>; Chan, *Source Book*, 137-138. This collection also indicates that it was prepared by a group of authors, rather than by one person.

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- <sup>88</sup> Cf. Star, *Tao Te Ching*, 7-9.
- <sup>89</sup> Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1993, 164-180. Schimmel may indicate a relationship of the (number of) 81 (chapters) of the *Dao De Jing* to the birth myth of Laozi, who, in one version, was born 9x9 years after his conception (170).
- <sup>90</sup> Cf. Peter Smith, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008, 261; Stephen Lambden "The Word Bahá: Quintessence of the Greatest Name," in *Bahá'í Studies Review* 3:1 (1993): 19-42.
- <sup>91</sup> Cf. Fischer-Schreiber, *Dictionary*, 175.
- <sup>92</sup> Cf. Cleary, *Tao*, 2. This early estimate is of course challenged by the fact that the *Dao De Jing* was already a reaction to Confucianism, imagining a different kind of society, and, hence, must be later in origin or, as a collection, fitting more into the time of the warring states of the third century B.C.E.; cf. Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 5, 21.
- <sup>93</sup> Cf. Chan, "Laozi," ch. 3; Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 3.
- <sup>94</sup> Cf. Alan Chan, "The *Daode Jing* and Its Tradition," in Olivia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 1-29.
- <sup>95</sup> Cf. Clarke, *Tao*, 61.
- <sup>96</sup> Cf. Chan, *Source Book*, 137.
- <sup>97</sup> Cf. Robinet, *Taoism*, 29. On the diverse traditional commentaries, cf. Chan, "Laozi," ch. 4.
- <sup>98</sup> Cf. Chad Hansen, "Daoism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), ch. 2 @ <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/daoism/>. *Dao Jia*, although it cannot ever be separated from origins in alchemical and shamanic surroundings and the development of its central figures into religious heroes, like Laozi, of *Dao Jiao*, can of course not be reduced to Laozi and the *Dao De Jing*, but, nevertheless, he and his book remain the "foundational" text together with the *Zhuangzi* and several other ancient works in a tradition that from the beginning has gathered itself among many traditions—the "thousand schools"—and among several streams of reception and interpretation, one of which might have been a Laozi-school. Cf. Blofeld, *Taoism*, chs. 1-2; Fung, *History*, chs. 2-3; Robinet, *Taoism*, ch. 1; Chan, *Source Book*, chs. 2-16; Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 8-9.
- <sup>99</sup> Cf. Wong, *Taoism*, ch. 2.
- <sup>100</sup> Cf. Grigg, *Tao*, 29-57; Clarke, *Tao*, ch. 2; Chan, *Source Book*, 136; Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 15-18, ch. 2; Fung, *History*, chs. 18-26.
- <sup>101</sup> Cf. Chen, *Tao*, 15-18; Watts, *Tao*, 27-31.
- <sup>102</sup> Cf. Needham, *Science*. Vol. 2, 86-100; Chad Hansen, "Daoism," ch. 3.

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- <sup>103</sup> Cf. Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 102; Clarke, *Tao*, 105.
- <sup>104</sup> Cf. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, ch. 6; Clarke, *Tao*, ch. 5. Yet, as many ideas, they may have been ideals, never to be realized in pure form, as, in fact, under the influence of Daoist political reign feudalism prevailed; cf. Kristofer Schipper, *The Daoist Body*. Trans. by Karen Duval. Berkeley: University of California, 1993, ch. 1.
- <sup>105</sup> Cf. Watts, *Tao*, 46-50.
- <sup>106</sup> Cf. Hansen, "Daoism," ch. 9.1.1. The differentiation between *why* and *how* does not exclude the Dao to be understood in metaphysical terms of ultimate reality—as it is mostly perceived to be: cf. Blofeld, *Taoism*, ch. 1; Chew, *Religion*, 25-28—but it warns us to attempt understanding ultimate reality beyond our ability to act, or to divide between mysticism and metaphysical insight, on the one hand, and ethics, world-engagement and social action, on the other. This might indicate a resonance of intention between the *Dao Dee Jing* and Bahá'u'lláh's explication of mystical-ethical insights in his "prophetic" collection of the *Hidden Words*. Cf. Todd Lawson, "Globalization and the Hidden Words," in Margit Warburg, Annika Hvithamar and Morten Warmind, eds., *Bahá'i and Globalization*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005, ch. 2.
- <sup>107</sup> Cf. *Dao De Jing*, #37; Fung, *History*, 97-102.
- <sup>108</sup> Cf. Blofeld, *Taoism*, ch. 3.
- <sup>109</sup> Cf. Hansen, "Daoism," chs 4, 9.1.1.
- <sup>110</sup> Cf. Needham, *Science*. Vol. 2, 74-83.
- <sup>111</sup> Cf. Hansen, *Theory*, ch. 3.
- <sup>112</sup> Cf. Hansen, *Theory*, ch. 4.
- <sup>113</sup> Cf. Hansen, "Daoism," ch. 2; Clarke, *Tao*, 175-184.
- <sup>114</sup> This relativism is not to be confounded with an "anything goes" approach, as westerners might feel to appropriate its insights, but as a new kind of normativity, namely, that of spontaneity in the flow of things; cf. Clarke, *Tao*, 98.
- <sup>115</sup> Cf. Fung, *History*, 102-103.
- <sup>116</sup> Cf. Hansen, *Theory*, 225; "Daoism," ch. 3.
- <sup>117</sup> Cf. Livia Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension*. Albany: State of New York University Press, 1991, ch. 1; Hanson, "Daoism," ch. 3.
- <sup>118</sup> Cf. Hansen, "Daoism," ch. 6; Clarke, *Tao*, 80-91.
- <sup>119</sup> Cf. Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, chs. 1-

2; Clark, *Tao*, ch. 7. This implies that we can, in fact, live according to “nature” if we follow the unknowable Dao, that is, as this mystical Way implies some kind of experiential metaphysical or even religious descriptive probabilities; cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 2. In the exemplarity of the “perfect human being” lies also a certain connection to the notion that the Manifestation is *the* mirror of the of apophatic Reality such that Reality, which is unknowable per se, becomes accessible in this mirror at least as the way of life implied in this knowledge, but not besides their revelation; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #30; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #5; *Questions*, #27. We might even find a resonance here to the fact that to reach this point of perfection is a rare possibility so far so that later elevations and divinizations of certain masters, but at least of Laozi, seem to demonstrate that such a possibility is by no means just a bottom up achievement, but might rather be the expression of grace from above, of divine embodiment.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Clark, *Tao*, ch. 8. In a more radical interpretation, this relativism equates with a pluralism that is (metaphysically) presupposing skepticism as to the ability to gain any insight into the nature of things; cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 2.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 9.1.1; Clarke, *Tao*, 101.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 6; Hansen, “Daoism,” 9.1.2; Clarke, *Tao*, 90-103. This “virtuosity” is like learning to carve wood along its grain, rather than against it, learning the natural way; cf. Watts, *Tao*, xvii.

<sup>123</sup> While the ideal of the Daoist sage is, therefore, the withdrawal from society into nature, this does not mean that Daoism was apolitical; rather it furthered resistance against the feudal society, and the creation of counter-societies of equality, based on agriculture, and generally with a pacifist orientation; cf. Clarke, *Tao*, 103-111; Robinet, *Taoism*, 27; Needham, *Science*. Vol. 2, 86-132.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Hansen, *Theory*, 212-213; Hansen, “Daoism,” chs. 3.3, 4, 8, 9.4, 9.5.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Hans-Georg Moeller. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, ch. 5. Situating the *Dao De Jing* primarily as a political philosophy in the context of the warring state period, Moeller speaks of the establishment of peace by the method of “dehumanization” (76).

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 7.

<sup>127</sup> *Dao De Jing*, #1; transl. by Hansen, “Daoism,” ch. 4.

<sup>128</sup> This does, however, not exclude political quarrels for supremacy of respective groups and religious “inclusion” of the other parties; cf. Clarke, *Tao*, 22-28. While exclusivism is especially haunting Abrahamic traditions, the possibility of one person in relation to different aspects of their life to embrace all three traditions, respectively, shows the

fundamental different approach to religious identity in the Chinese context.

- <sup>129</sup> Cf. Grigg, *Tao*, passim; Joseph Bracken, *The Divine Matrix: Creativity as a Link between East and West*. New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 133-135.
- <sup>130</sup> Compassion (*sanbao*) is one of the three root virtues in Daoist living, one of the "Three Treasures," first appearing in the *Dao De Jing*, #67; cf. Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of Lao-tse*, Random House, 1948, 292; Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist- Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Edited by, 3-68. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, 3-67. Cf. Kohn, *Mysticism*, ch. 6; Hansen, "Daoism," ch. 8.
- <sup>131</sup> Cf., Antonio Cua, "Opposites as complements: reflections on the significance of Tao," in *Philosophy East and West*, 31:2 (1981): 123-40; Hansen, "Daoism," chs. 4, 9.2.
- <sup>132</sup> Cf. Ellen Marie Chen, "Nothingness and the mother principle in early Chinese Taoism," in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1969): 391-405.
- <sup>133</sup> The identification of ultimate reality with "nothingness" is based on the term *wuji*, which is itself a term of ultimate reality. It appears for the first time in the *Dao De Jing*, #28 and also means the limitless infinite in the *Zhuangzi*, ##1, 6, 11, 15; cf. Zhang Dainian and Edmund Ryden, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2002, 72. For the resonances with the "two truths" and Madhyamika cf. Friederike Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism*, Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press, 2009; Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse in the *Laozi*," in Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, ch. 1.
- <sup>134</sup> *Dao De Jing*, #1.
- <sup>135</sup> For the thesis that Daoism and Buddhism in China were not two contrasting religions, cf. Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religions*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981, 412. For the deep resonances with Zen, cf. Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, chs. 2-3.
- <sup>136</sup> If we think of Daoism as philosophy (*dao jia*), being internally touched by the truth of its proposition (correlating it with experience) is to be expected; cf. Bahá'u'lláh's praise of philosophers, especially Socrates, in his *Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, 146-147. However, if we view Daoism as religion (*dao jiao*) it could be said that it is the Bahá'í conviction that all religions receive their life from the same apophatic source of Reality/God (*al-haqq*) and, hence, are not a dead body of the past, but alive in the unity of Manifestations with their eternal (time-relative, but -invariant) effect in the world of becoming and perishing,

that is, are beyond the boundaries of the religious identities with which they are identified universally “present.” In this sense, the Bahá’í view of unity is not the expression of a simple supersessionism, in which all religions of the past are “overcome,” but one in which they communicate in an “analogy of faiths” in mutual coinherence and coinhabitation; cf. Faber, *Garden*, ch. 8: section 6. Therefore, it is not a mere intellectual interest that feeds any serious investigation into the diverse relations from a Bahá’í perspective, but the amazing potential to be able to spiritually understand and share (*irfan*) from the inside in the spiritual and divine power or grace (*fiyḍ*) in *their* confluence in the Bahá’í view—“with the eye of God,” rather than as an objective dissector. In some meaningful sense, a Bahá’í could claim to be a believer in these religions, sharing in their riches, as s/he does not make any difference between them (in their origin, in their Manifestations); cf. Stephen Lambden, “Dimensions of Abrahamic and Babi-Bahā’ī Soteriology: Some Notes on the Bahā’ī theology of the Salvific and Redemptive role of Bahā’-Allāh,” 2017 @ <https://hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/3451>. This view is, on a much more tentative basis, current standard understanding of methodological access to multiple religions in comparative studies; cf. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, chs. 1-2; Raymond Panikkar, “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” in Gerald Larson and Eliot Deutsch, eds., *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, 116-36.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. *Dao De Jing*, #8.

<sup>138</sup> D.C. Lau, “The treatment of opposites in Lao-tzu,” in *Bulletin of the Society for Oriental and African Studies* 21 (1958): 344-60.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. David Hall, “Process and anarchy: a Taoist vision of creativity,” in *Philosophy East and West*, 28:3 (1978): 271-85. This is, of course, a modern perception, taking into account the radical potentials of the ideas inherent in the ideas even if they have not, at the time of their inception, been realized in such a radical way.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, chs. 5-9. For the Bahá’í context, philosophically, all of these characteristics can be traced back to the Báb and his metaphysical and spiritual understanding of this cosmos to be released from the Divine Point (Will, Mind), which is in its own complex way both unity and diversity, non-opposition and differentiation, creativeness and receptiveness; cf. Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010, part 2.

<sup>141</sup> This is, from a Bahá’í perspective, rather a “natural” assumption, as all Manifestations and, in extension, all religions in their true core teach the same truths; cf. Dann May, “The Bahá’í Principle of Religious Unity,” in



Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology*. Studies in the Bábi and Bahá'í Religions. LA: Kalimat Press, 1997, 1-36. "Confluence" is also always the recognition of the mutual coinherence and coinhabitation, the *translucency* of religions in the new event of gathering—for Bahá'ís, the new revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. This is the heart of the Bahá'í conviction of the relativity of religious truth; cf. Faber, *Garden*, chs. 1, 9; Juan Cole, "I am all the Prophets': The Poetics of Pluralism in Bahá'í Texts." In *Poetics Today* 14:3 (Fall 1993): 447-76.

<sup>142</sup> The most comprehensive comparison between Chinese Religions and the Bahá'í Faith, that is, mostly of Daoism and Confucianism, which for many Baha'ís may feel more familiar, is still Chew, *Religions*. And the most excellent comparison of Bahá'í sensitivities with the *Dao De Jing* can be found in Chew, "The Great Tao," 11-39. For the Islamic philosophical background of the Bahá'í Faith in relation to Daoism, cf. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Chew, "The Great Tao," 17-19; Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith*, 31-35. As to the apophatic nature of the Godhead and its implications as well as the breathtaking interference with "its" manifestation as and in the world, cf. Stephen Lambden, "The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábi and Bahá'í Scripture," in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 37-78; Moojan Momen, "The God of Bahá'u'lláh," in Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions: Papers presented at the Irfan Colloquia*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 1-38.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. Isuzu, *Sufism*, part 1/II and part 2/VII. It would be limiting if we were tempted to reserve *this* intended "apophatic" Oneness to the unknowable Godhead (as "formless") by exclusion of the manifest "God" (Primal Will) as "formed" or "determined." Rather, the unity of unnamable and manifest Dao is a hint to the "divine sphere" of *both* these highest realms of divinity, crossing the highest realms of divine "existence," symbolically sometimes addressed in Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings as *hahut* and *lahut*; cf. Momen, "God of Bahá'u'lláh," 25. And the Primal Will in the writings of the Báb is not "form" either, but infinite potential to be determined by form, united in the Primal Point; cf. Saiedi, *Gate*, 183, 202 (and the whole of chs. 7-8).

<sup>145</sup> This "emptiness" is directed against all projections on "it" of categories, which remain always only *our* abstractions, not "its" reality. This, among other things, is also addressed in the Islamic and Bahá'í universe of discourse by the expression that God alone "exists." For the implications, explicated in Bahá'u'lláh's tablet of Uncompounded Reality, cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Law -i Basít al-Haqíqa)*. Introduction and translation by Moojan Momen: "Bahá'u'lláh's

Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Law -i Basít al-Haqíqa) in: *Lights of Irfan* 11 (2010): 203-21; Faber, "Bahá'u'lláh," 53-106.

- <sup>146</sup> Bahá'í writings follow the maxim that absolute unity excludes all attributes; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Valleys*, 24 (Seven Valleys: Valley of Knowledge). This "exclusion" also applies to any emphasis on unity over and against multiplicity. We must learn to "perceive, with an eye purged from all conflicting elements, the worlds of unity and diversity, of variation and oneness, of limitation and detachment"; Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqan*, 160. For the philosophical and theological importance of this insight against such a simplified emphasis and its unfortunate implications, cf. Faber, *Divine Manifold*, part 1.
- <sup>147</sup> Cf. Chew, "The Great Dao," 19-21. For the differentiation between exclusive and inclusive unity (*ahadiyyah* and *wahadiyyah*, respectively) and their mutual interference on *all* levels of existence in the Bahá'í context, cf. Rhett Diessner, *Psyche*, ch. 1.
- <sup>148</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, #37.
- <sup>149</sup> Cf. Chew, "Great Dao," 21-22. For the motive of creation out of love and beauty, cf. Abdu'l Bahá, *Commentary on the Islamic Tradition "I Was a Hidden Treasure."* Translation by by Moojan Momen, in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, 3:4 (1995): 4-35.
- <sup>150</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Days*, #9; *Gleanings*, #131.
- <sup>151</sup> Spontaneity (*bada'*) is the essence of creativity, be it of God or of any creature; cf. Saiedi, *Gate*, chs.7-8; 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: UMI, 1998.
- <sup>152</sup> Cf. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, #14; *Tablet of the Son (Jesus)* h9 in Juan R. I. Cole, "Baha'u'llah's 'Tablet of the Son [Jesus]': Translation and Commentary. *Translations of Shaykhí, Babi and Baha'i Texts*, 5(2), May 2001 @ <http://www.h-net.org/bahai/trans/vol5/son/bhson.htm>; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2012, #93.
- <sup>153</sup> Again, the *continuity* of such religious insights is more than a distancing statement about some "other" religion, but rather the translucency of their *internal* communication in the unity of all religions and their Manifestations; cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 1996, 108.
- <sup>154</sup> Cf. Phyllis Chew, "Religious Pluralism in Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith," in *World Order* 34:1 (2002): 27-44; Moojan Momen, "Relativism: A Theological and Cognitive Basis For Bahá'í Ideas," in *Lights of Irfan* 12 (2010): 367-97.

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- <sup>155</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13.
- <sup>156</sup> Cf. Momen, "God," 14.
- <sup>157</sup> Cf. Momen, "God," 15-17; 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.
- <sup>158</sup> Cf. May, "Principle," 25-27.
- <sup>159</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #40; Christopher Buck, "Fifty Bahá'í Principles of Unity: A Paradigm of Social Salvation," in *Bahá'í Studies Review* 18 (2012): 3-44.
- <sup>160</sup> Cf. Chew, "Great Dao," 24-33; Chew, *Religions*, chs. 8-24. Many resonances cannot be discussed here, but can to a good extent be found in Chew's work, such as strategies for peace, education, priority of agriculture (maybe ecology?), overcoming of prejudices, principles of living as a sage, striving for perfection (as to be realized at any given moment and in any given situation), growth of character and insight, political strategies of non-violence and non-interference (*wu wei*), organicity of living and acting, multiplicity of communities, interreligious relationships, and so on. For mystical insight (*irfan*) as one of widening perceptivity, cf. Roland Faber, *God as Poet of the World: Exploring Process Theologies*. Louisville: WJK, 2008, h48.
- <sup>161</sup> Cf. Chew, "Great Dao," 22-24; Julio Savi, "The Sufi Stages of the Soul in Bahá'u'lláh's The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys," in Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions: Papers presented at the Irfan Colloquia*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 89-106.
- <sup>162</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet to Jamal-i-Burujirdi (Lawh-i-Jamál-i-Burujirdi)*. Translation by Khazeh Fananapazir, in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, 5:1-2 (1991) 4-8 @ [http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah\\_lawh\\_jamal\\_burujirdi](http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_jamal_burujirdi).
- <sup>163</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #41; *Promulgation*, ##71, 105.
- <sup>164</sup> Cf. Zhihe Wang, *Process and Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity*. Frankfurt, GER: ontosverlag, 2013.
- <sup>165</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, chs. 5, 7; Faber, "Religion," 167-182; Roland Faber, "Process, Progress, Excess: Whitehead and the Peace of Society," in Łukasz Lamża and Jakub Dziadkowiec, eds, *Recent Advances in the Creation of a Process-Based Worldview: Human Life in Process*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, 6-20; Roland Faber, "Becoming Intermezzo: Eco-Theopoetics After the Anthropic Principle," in Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal, eds., *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*. New York: Fordham Press, 2013, 212-238.
- <sup>166</sup> Cf. SWAB #225. This image is the basis for the reflections on the relativity of religious truth for a future civilization of peace in my *Garden*, ch. 2.

- <sup>167</sup> While this might sound somehow too anarchic for a Bahá'í understanding for which the novelty of the current Manifestation is also related to a new matrix of commandments, one should also not forget that the *Kitab-i Aqdas* is not constructed and presented as a casuistic law book, but as a “choice wine”; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1993, ¶4-5. This character challenges humanity to implement its meanings and ordinances in highly creative ways by sensing the necessities and predicaments of, and choices we have in, an interrelated, ecological world—never without the originative impulse of the individual insight and understanding in any given situation, but always oriented toward the greater insight and understanding; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1994, 200: “Blessed are those who meditate upon it [*Aqdas*]. Blessed are those who ponder its meaning.” While Confucianism might feel as the more “natural” choice in this context, as it relates clear social structures, the overturning of traditional orders is a pressing motive of the novelty of this, and every, new Manifestation; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, #143. This is an area where more research and imagination will be fruitful. Cf. Roland Faber, *God as Poet*, ¶¶44, 46; Roland Faber, *The Becoming of God: Process Theology, Philosophy and Multireligious Engagement*. Portland, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017, Sphere V.
- <sup>168</sup> Cf. Faber, *God as Poet*, h41-42; *Divine Manifold*, Intermezzo 1; *Garden*, Epilogue (sec. 4).
- <sup>169</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, ##8, 11; ADJ 35-36.
- <sup>170</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, #225.
- <sup>171</sup> Cf. John Kolstoe, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1988.
- <sup>172</sup> This would seem to be part of the serious application of Bahá'u'lláh's imperative of the equality of, and non-difference between, Manifestations; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, #24.
- <sup>173</sup> Cf. Momen, “Bahá'í Approach,” 167-188; “Learning from History,” in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2:2 (1989) @ [https://bahai-library.com/momen\\_learning\\_from\\_history](https://bahai-library.com/momen_learning_from_history).
- <sup>174</sup> Such complex relationships (between theism and monism) are by no means external to the philosophical and religious becoming of the Bábi-Bahá'í religions, as they are fluent in a vast Sufi universe of discourse and their relationship to eastern traditions of thought and wisdoms, especially regarding non-dual thinking; cf. Izutsu, *Sufism*, chs. 2, 4-5; Momen, “God,” 1-8; Faber, “Bahá'u'lláh,” 53-106.
- <sup>175</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, part 2.

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- <sup>176</sup> This “nature” is not controlled by reason or the Logos in an Abrahamic sense, which again has God as the ultimate point of reference, but also not in the Stoic sense, which does avoid reference to a transcendent Godhead; cf. Watts, *Tao*, 41-42; Longxi Zhang, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*. Duke University Press, 1992, 22-34.
- <sup>177</sup> Here, questions of the *status* of any law of prophets, their “books,” come into sharp relieve with the change of any such law from dispensation to dispensation and even within any dispensation according to the changing exigencies of the time. In light of the Daoist antinomian ultimate (the apophatic), we may also recognize more starkly the contrast between two imperatives: to follow the temporal recognition of a Manifestation and its commandments, but also to always follow the indefinite presupposition of non-imitation and independent insight into Truth/Dao.
- <sup>178</sup> Cf. Chung-yuan Chang and Zhao Xian Batt, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry*. London: Julian Press, 1965.
- <sup>179</sup> This is the reason that *process* thought can be a means of mediation, not only as it is acknowledged to present this Chinese “processual” universe in western language—and as it is also used by Chinese scholars to translate their thought—but even more so as the very basis of the Bábi-Bahá’í universe of discourse lies in the process philosophy of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’í that directly connects the process thought of the philosophical Bahá’í background to Chinese categories of feeling and thought; cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. ed. by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978, 7, 21; Hamid, *Metaphysics*, ch. 4; Faber, *Garden*, ch. 3.
- <sup>180</sup> Hence, mutual translation *is* possible, as especially the work (and the reception of the work) of Alfred N. Whitehead has demonstrated; cf. Needham, *Science*. Vol. 2, passim; David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking Through Confucianism*. Albany, State University of New York, 1987; Faber, *Divine Manifold*, chs. 7-8, 15; *God as Poet*, hh19, 39; Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: Free Press, 1967, ch. 20.
- <sup>181</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #79.
- <sup>182</sup> This linear simplicity is also broken by the *metaphoric* of the Bahá’í writings of *cyclic* becoming (of renewal and phases of revelations and dispensations), which is not necessarily such that all that the last cycle has produced—such as trees—are, in the new season, dead and exchanged; this is also corroborated by the fact that a garden of many flowers is beautiful not because all of them have become the same flower in a certain time or area (or dispensation), but because multiplicity itself contributes to the beauty, and only as long as it is appreciated and respected; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, #4; *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1991, #14.

<sup>183</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, 44, 47. Lee Sun Chen, *Laozi's Daodejing*. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2011, xvii-xviii; Albert Cheung, "The Common Teachings from Chinese Culture and the Bahá'í Faith: From Material Civilization to Spiritual Civilization," in *Lights of Irfan* 1 (2000): 38. While emphasis is given to Laozi, here, a full understanding would have to explicate the role of other sages, such as Zhuangzi and, especially, Confucius. This is also highlights by the fact that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions Confucius as an "ethical reformer," he seems not to suggest that he was "only" such a reformer, but rather a reformer of *profound* impact on the development of human civilization (which would meet the historical facts), as he is still mentioned among a series in which all other personages are considered Manifestations; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #109.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 155. In other words, it is not enough *only* to take recourse to the fact that any revelation comes to a closure (in some profound sense, even if there may remain mechanisms of renewal) and, hence, over the time of its further unfolding in the respective religious community with its own history will have to live from its references *backwards*, which inevitably and eventually implies that it will become out of sync with the new times it might even have helped to instigate; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #41; *Questions*, #43. We must, instead, try to seek a framework that allows these "blind spots" of every contingent limitation of revelation in time and space as created by its recipients—that is, this fact does not necessarily include the view of the imperfection of the revelation in itself; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, #22—to be *constructively* addressed. One of these frameworks is religious pluralism, as already mentioned in other sections; another one appears in the foundational principle of the relativity of religious truth, which must be made to bear on this matter here, as a form of *relationality* or *mutuality*, which, theoretically, allows for the discovery of the other not as alien, but already as moment of one's self and vice versa and, practically, emphasizes the ability to listen and learn; cf. Faber, *Becoming of God*, Sphere V.

<sup>185</sup> This is part of a wider task, namely, to fulfill 'Abdu'l-Bahá's request to study *all* religions—*Promulgation*, #121; *Paris Talks*, #41—in fairness and in seeking the garden of truth in them as a means to establish the rationality of the oneness of religions and by valuing their contributions to it; an endeavor that has only begun to take hold becoming part of a sustained effort in Bahá'í consciousness, but has become a general presupposition of interreligious dialogue today. Compare only to the works of one of the foremost thinkers of such an intellectual dialogue over the last decades: Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995;

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*Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007; *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009; and as editor of: *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015.

- <sup>186</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá admonishes Bahá’í to grow into this new consciousness that means nothing less than to *love* all religions; cf. *Selections*, #34.
- <sup>187</sup> Cf. the concept of *polyphilic* (religious) pluralism: Faber, *God as Poet*, Postscript; *Divine Manifold*, Intermezzo 2; *Becoming of God*, Explorations 14-15; Roland Faber and Catherine Keller, “Polyphilic Pluralism: Becoming Religious Multiplicities,” in Chris Boesel and Wesley Ariarajah, eds., In *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, 58-81.
- <sup>188</sup> This is also implied by Shoghi Effendi’s statements on the receptivity of the Bahá’í universe of other religions, such as this: “The Faith standing identified with the name of Bahá’u’lláh disclaims any intention to belittle any of the Prophets gone before Him, to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents,” in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day*, 108.
- <sup>189</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #40: “In short, it behooves us all to be lovers of truth. Let us seek her in every season and in every country, being careful never to attach ourselves to personalities. Let us see the light wherever it shines, and may we be enabled to recognize the light of truth no matter where it may arise.”
- <sup>190</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #126; *Selections*, #225; Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, sections “Unity in Diversity.”
- <sup>191</sup> Many more aspects of the whole phenomenon of the religion of Daoism, of which Laozi and the *Dao De Jing* are inextricable part, cannot be brought into conversation here: the practical life of a cultivation of “becoming human,” the mystical, sexual and alchemical practices, the urge to realize (physical) immortality, the vast complexity of Daoist scriptures and history must, of course, also be part of a thorough discussion; cf. Kohn, *Taoism*, chs. 2-8; Wong, *Taoism*, parts 2-3.
- <sup>192</sup> Cf. Bowers, *God*, ch. 13.
- <sup>193</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, 49. Of course, we can always refer to the universal revelation in all of nature as foundational basis for such an occurrence being more than a coincidence; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #125. But this would miss the point because of the cyclicity of Manifestations revealing themselves in human history as an inevitable additional (although in its depth not different) movement for the advance and education of

humanity; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, #34; *Questions*, #39; *Promulgation*, #106.

- <sup>194</sup> Cf. Michael Sours, *Without Syllable and Sound: The Worlds Sacred Scriptures in the Bahá’í Faith*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2000, chs. 1, 9.
- <sup>195</sup> Cf. Lambden, “Background,” 1; John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, chs. 14-16.
- <sup>196</sup> Hornby, *Lights*, #1694. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, November 10, 1939.
- <sup>197</sup> Cf. Mirza Tahir Ahmad, *Revelation, Rationality and Truth*. Tilford: Islam International Publishing, 1998, 165-170; Linda Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland. An Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002, 83.
- <sup>198</sup> Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, 22 (Second Bisharat); Fazel, “Dialogue,” 137-152.
- <sup>199</sup> For preliminary considerations of what, in general, such a framework could include, cf. Seena Fazel, “Dialogue,” 137-152.
- <sup>200</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Star of the West* 21 (1930): 261.
- <sup>201</sup> Cf. Peter Smith, *An Introduction to the Bahá’í Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 129-131.
- <sup>202</sup> Cf. Momen, “God,” 23-28.
- <sup>203</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, #24; Sours, *Syllable*, 17-18.
- <sup>204</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, #25.
- <sup>205</sup> Tentatively, such a view is implied in certain guidance of Shoghi Effendi when relating to Joseph Smith and Emanuel Swedenborg as religious teachers sensitive to the revelations of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh; cf. Hornby, *Lights*, ##1719-1722, 1728.
- <sup>206</sup> However, as with Swedenborg and Smith, the force field of revelation could be understood as stretching beyond chronological time and embracing not only the future, but also the past as mode of its arising.
- <sup>207</sup> Cf. Wong, *Taoism*, chs. 1-2.
- <sup>208</sup> Cf. Smart, *Religions*, 124; Arthur Write, *Buddhism in Chinese History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959, ch. 1.
- <sup>209</sup> Cf. *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2006, 155.
- <sup>210</sup> Cf. Smart, *Religions*, 124-128, 13-151; Grigg, *Tao*, part 1.
- <sup>211</sup> Cf. Christian von Dehsen, ed., *Philosophers and Religious Leaders: An Encyclopedia of People Who Changed the World*. New York: Onyx Press, 1999, 113.



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- <sup>212</sup> Cf. Rudolf Ritsema and Stephen Karcher, *I Ching: The Classical Chinese Oracle of Change*. Shaftesbury: Element, 1994, 12-13.
- <sup>213</sup> Cf. Chew, *Religions*, 49-50.
- <sup>214</sup> Cf. Hornby, *Light*, #1696.
- <sup>215</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, #87.
- <sup>216</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, ch. 1.
- <sup>217</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, 291-293; Bede Bidlack, *In Good Company: The Body and Divinization in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ and Daoist Xiao Yingsou*. Leiden: Brill, 2015, 58-60.
- <sup>218</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, 78; Bahá'u'lláh, GL, #13. The “book” is the Qur’anic sign of a High Prophet and is, as such, a divine sign upheld by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; cf. Sours, *Syllable*, ch. 2.
- <sup>219</sup> Cf. Starr, *Dao De Jing*, #1.
- <sup>220</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, 121-129; GWB #28; SAQ #30.
- <sup>221</sup> One cannot simply counter that Christ was conceived as divine from the outset. Current exegetical knowledge has confirmed that a divine self-designation of Jesus, that is, a divine self-consciousness, is not a priori impossible, but that the becoming-divine of Jesus in the full sense of the Councils of the fourth and fifth century C.E. has taken that time to be fully established and settled. That the process regarding Lord Lao took “longer,” namely, about a five hundred year span to develop a full understanding of his divinity, hence, cannot simply be viewed as deep a counter-argument; cf. Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. New York: HarperOne, 2014. Nevertheless, the consciousness to be the “Son of Man,” the most reliable self-identification of Jesus in an exegetical context, speaks for the extraordinary consciousness of Jesus, yet widely misunderstood even by his closest followers, only becoming alive by their experience of his exultation; cf. Hurtado, *God*, ch. 5; Chrys Caragounis, *The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986, ch. 4; Andrew Loke, in *The Origins of Divine Christology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- <sup>222</sup> Much later deification speaks against this assumption; cf. Kohn, *God*, passim.
- <sup>223</sup> Cf. Tan Chung, *Himalaya Calling: The Origins of China and India*. Hackensack, NJ: Word Century Publishing, 2015, 71-74.
- <sup>224</sup> Cf. Livia Kohn, *Laughing at the Dao: Debates among Buddhists and Daoists in Medieval China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009. In fact, this argument of “immunization” may rather contribute to the impossibility to accept a new event, such as the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh, in light of the “old” master; cf. Faber, *Garden*, ch. 9.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. Kohn, *God*, chs. 1, 5-6.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. Horny, *Lights*, #1683, 1692-1693, 1696, et alia.

<sup>227</sup> In the *Persian Bayan*, for instance, the Báb writes of “a thousand thousand Manifestations”; cf. The Báb, *Persian Bayan*, III:15, in Moojan Momen, ed., *Selections of the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, 348. Cf. also thesis 6.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Louis Komjathy, *The Taoist Tradition: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, ch. 2.

<sup>229</sup> Cf. Chan, “Laozi,” ch. 2.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. Craig Bartholomew, “Old Testament Wisdom Today,” in David Firth and Lindsay Wilson, eds., *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Publishing, 2017, ch. 1; Edward Curtis, *Interpreting the Wisdom Books: An Exegetical Handbook*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017, ch. 1. The collective character of the Wisdom literature is also significant in our context as it represents *scriptural* texts, sometimes accumulated around personages like Job, but also exhibiting anonymous, but prominently assigned authorship, such as David and Solomon, while still being considered part of scripture, or, on other cases, such as the *Book of Wisdom*, closely connected to it, while not necessarily being about or transporting revelation by a prophet.

<sup>231</sup> Cf. Chen, *Tao De Ching*, ch. 1.

<sup>232</sup> Cf. Hornby, *Lights*, #1694; Buck, “Identity,” 172-186; Seena Fazel, “Bahá’í Approaches to Christianity and Islam: Further Thoughts on Developing an Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *Bahá’í Studies Review* 14 (2008): 46-47.

<sup>233</sup> The “perfect Shi’a,” modeled on the “Perfect Man” of Sufism, is present in the background of the Bábí-Bahá’í religions through the Shaykhi school for which this belief formed the so-called “Fourth Support”; cf. Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 228.

<sup>234</sup> Cf. Guang Xing, *The Concept of the Buddha: Its evolution from early Buddhism to the trikāya theory*. New York: Routledge, 2010, ch. 1.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitab-i Iqan: The Book of Certitude*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1974, 107. Additionally, even if the Báb would have known that Bahá’u’lláh is the awaited Manifestation (*man yazhiruhu’lla*)—and there are indications of such a knowledge in the Bábí-Bahá’í writings as well as some speculations around a physical or spiritual meeting of both Manifestations—he did not, besides subtle references to words and phrases related to augmentations of the word *bahá*, divulge this knowledge. In a deeper sense, this fact is related to this freedom of a Manifestation to choose its becoming revealed to the world.

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- <sup>236</sup> In a certain sense, any Manifestation is a “hidden” Manifestation, as no Manifestation just openly appears in divine attire, but always in a “cloud”; cf. Michael Sours, *The Prophecies of Jesus*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1993, 114-131. Bahá’u’lláh mentions that the reason for this “hiddenness” is the freedom of humanity to develop the sense to apprehend and believe in the Manifestation out of spiritual effort and freedom, instead of coercion; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #29.
- <sup>237</sup> Cf. Romans 1:1-4. As in Christian texts, adoption-, exaltation-, divine mission- (and incarnation-) views appear together from early biblical texts on, but were harmonized in the later centuries by the two-nature-in-one-person doctrine, so is the Bahá’í understanding of the eternity and temporality of a Manifestation harmonized in the teaching of the two stations and natures or twofold station and nature such that the appearance of a Manifestation on the cosmic plane exhibits always essentially both aspects, that is, is never only human, but was always already divine, pre-eternal, pre-existent, as it were, as s/he is the Self of God in the Primal Will of which s/he is an appearance, meta-historically and historically; Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #29; Sours, *Station*, ch. 4. For refutation of the Ebionite adoption view within a Bahá’í context, cf. Christopher Buck, “Illuminator vs. Redeemer: Was Ebionite Adam/Christ Prophetology “Original,” Anti-Pauline, or “Gnostic”? @ [https://bahai-library.com/pdf/b/buck\\_illuminator\\_redeemer.pdf](https://bahai-library.com/pdf/b/buck_illuminator_redeemer.pdf).
- <sup>238</sup> The so-called “messianic secret” in the New Testament is, in fact, a major player in the gradual revelation of the nature and status of the person and identity of Jesus, documented throughout the gospels; cf. William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*. trans. by J. C. G. Creig. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1971. And there are similarities with the gradual unveiling of the mission of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh; cf. Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret: Qur’an Commentary in Bahá’u’lláh’s Kitáb-i Ṣqán*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004, ch. 5. But this would be besides the point in our context since the “hiddenness” indicated, here, would relate to the lifetime of a Manifestation before the declaration, for instance, the “lost years” of Jesus before his baptism.
- <sup>239</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #27.
- <sup>240</sup> Cf. Saiedi, *Gate*, 164; Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle*, 111.
- <sup>241</sup> Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #22.
- <sup>242</sup> Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, #49. One might think of the transfiguration-scene in the Gospels (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36) and the universal appearance of Krishna in the *Bhagavat Gita* (ch. 11) compared to which the humanity of the Manifestation normally and effectively shields the divine impression in most encounters—resonant with Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretation of the apocalyptic biblical and primordial Qur’anic image

of the “cloud” as veil hindering the recognition of a Manifestation; cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Iqan*, part 1. In fact, most of the efforts of Manifestations seem to consist in providing ways to lead their surroundings the perception of their divine inspiration or even origin.

<sup>243</sup> This might be related to the biblical *kenosis*-scheme, found prominently in the Deutero-Isaiah figure of the Suffering Servant, cf. Isaiah 53, and its adoption in the Pauline Hymn of Philippians 2:9-11. It should also be noted that Christian theology has, at times, taken this kenotic appearance of God in this world in the human figure of Christ as an “incognito” movement, as witnessed in Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner; cf. Bernard Ramm, *An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic and Historic*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1985, 58-59.

<sup>244</sup> Cf. Ehrman, *Jesus*, chs. 6-7.

<sup>245</sup> Cf. May, “Bahá’í Principle,” xx.

<sup>246</sup> Cf. Smith, *Encyclopedia*, 291. Although these religions, or selections thereof, are sometimes mentioned as affirmed by the Bahá’í writings—cf. Kenneth Bowers, *God Speaks Again: An Introduction to the Bahá’í Faith*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2004, 96—and also to indicate the “progressiveness” of religions, the writings themselves don’t claim any exclusivity to them as an exhaustive list.

<sup>247</sup> Cf. Hornby, *Lights*, #1373.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. Hornby, *Lights*, ##1373-1375; Ezekiel 1:26; Lambden, “Word Bahá,” 19-42.

<sup>249</sup> In identifying religions, it is not the “religions” that the Bahá’í writings emphasize, but the Manifestations that engendered religious movements, who are also not necessarily identical with, or limited to, the later established and settled forms of self-identifications of these religions with their founders; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, #43. Conversely, because of the complex non-identity of religions with Manifestations (as their founders) a whole interreligious space of conversations about both religions and Manifestations become available.

<sup>250</sup> In fact, even this list of *named* Manifestations in the Bahá’í writings is incomplete Cf. Stockman, *Bahá’í Faith*, 25-38.

<sup>251</sup> Cf. Hornby, *Lights*, #1373.

<sup>252</sup> Cf. The Báb, SWB 105; GWB #87; SAQ #50.

<sup>253</sup> Cf. Hornby, *Lights*, #1373.

<sup>254</sup> When Shoghi Effendi states that these are the great religions “of which we have any definite historical knowledge,” and as we can assume that this is not meant to limit historical research into what can be known at any point in the future (from this statement), as Shoghi Effendi explicitly denies, we could maybe understand this “knowledge” *in relation* to

(limited to the appearance in) the Bahá'í writings, as Shoghi Effendi encourages historical research, but (in our context) demonstrates restraint regarding religious statements that would not have a foundation in the writings themselves; cf. Hornby, *Lights*, #1374. This seems also to be indicated with Shoghi Effendi's references to Sabeanism and Hinduism, that is, that we cannot know from the writings more about them as we actually find in them; cf. *ibid*, ##1692-1694. This same hermeneutical approach can also be assumed from the statement of Shoghi Effendi, that "the only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic Prophets is because Their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history. Buddha is mentioned, and Zoroaster, in our Scriptures -- both non- Jewish Prophets or non-Semitic Prophets"; cf. *Compilation of Compilations*. Vol. 1. Compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Mona Vale: Baha'i Publications Australia, 1991, 21 (#22).

<sup>255</sup> For a differentiated reflection on "progressive revelation" without such symbolic inaugurations, cf. Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith*, 35-37, 42-43. The statement of Bahá'u'lláh that all religions are of divine origin, with some exceptions, which he thinks to be of human invention, seems also to imply that not only the mentioned (named) religions are intended, as do similar statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá regarding the love of, and finding truth in, all religions; cf. GWB #111; PT #41; SWAB #43.

<sup>256</sup> Cf. Winfred C. Smith, *What is Scripture?* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.

<sup>257</sup> Hornby, *Lights*, #1375.

<sup>258</sup> In his high imamology, the Báb considered the Imams—and by extensions the Apostles of Christ—as part of a divine pleroma, which always appears with the Point, the Prophet or the Manifestation, and emanates from this one Soul; cf. The Báb, *Persian Bayan*, Exordium and Wahid I, in: Momen, *Selections*, 322-325; <http://www.h-net.org/bahai/trans/bayan/bayan.htm>.

<sup>259</sup> While Krishna is named a Manifestation in the "canonical" Bahá'í catalogue, this figure cannot be considered the "founder" of Hinduism. Also, like Laozi, Krishna is probably a composite figure (thesis 7).

<sup>260</sup> Cf. Qur'an 12; cf. Todd Lawson, "Typological Figuration and the Meaning of 'Spiritual': The Qur'anic Story of Joseph," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132:2 (2012): 221-244; Lawson, "The Bahá'í Tradition: The Return of Josef and the Peaceable Imagination," in John Renard, ed., *Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 135-57.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. Qur'an 19:12-15; Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqan*, 64-65; *Epistle*, 171.

<sup>262</sup> Cf. Juan Cole, "Behold the Man: Baha'u'llah on the Life of Jesus," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65:1 (1997): 62; The Báb,

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Wilmette: IL, Bahá'í Pub., 2014, 49; Bahá'u'lláh, *Days*, #44; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 23.

<sup>263</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqan*, 167-168, 212, 254.

<sup>264</sup> Bahá'u'lláh considers the hidden twelfth Imam, the personification of which is understood to be the Báb, as even *more than all* preceding prophets; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqan*, 243-244.

<sup>265</sup> Stephen Lambden has pointed to passages—passages in which holy figures, such as the patriarch/prophet Josef, Son of Jacob (Israel), are named Manifestations (*mazhar-i ilahi*)—in the Bahá'í writings; cf. Lambden, *Some Aspects of Isrā'iliyyāt and the Emergence of the Bābī-Bahā'ī Interpretation of the Bible*. Dissertation: Newcastle University, 2002, 51

<sup>266</sup> Cf. Saiedi, *Gate*, 168.

<sup>267</sup> Cf. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Faith: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977, 51-73. Already with the Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi and several Shi'ite “extremists,” like Ismaelis and Nusayris, Fatimah appears as divine creatrix; cf. Corbin, *Alone*, 160.

<sup>268</sup> Cf. Dunn, *Christology*, chs. 5-7.

<sup>269</sup> Cf. Sours, *Syllable*, ch. 2; *Station*, ch. 7; Stephen Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bābī and Bahá'í Scripture,” in Moojan Momen, ed., *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988, 65-184; “Word Bahá,” 19-42.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. Hurtado, *God*, ch. 2.

<sup>271</sup> Cf. Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994, ch. 8.

<sup>272</sup> Cf. GWB #34; TB #11; SDC 97, #147;

<sup>273</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Law-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, in *Tablets*, ch. 9; *Prayers*, ##86, 93;

<sup>274</sup> Cf. Witherington, *Jesus*, ch. 2; cf. Curtis, *Wisdom Literature*, ch. 4.

<sup>275</sup> Cf. John 1:1-18; Witherington, *Jesus*, 368-380.

<sup>276</sup> Cf. Daniel 1:20; 2:13; Jacques Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000, 6-12. The influence of the *Book of Daniel* on the Bahá'í Writings is not only attested by their application of its apocalyptic mathematics regarding the coming of the Son of Man/Messianic King from Jewish and Christian writings in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exegesis of it — cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, ##10, 13 — but by figuring as the basis for Bahá'u'lláh's exegesis of the Olivet Discourse of Mathew 24, which underlies the whole first part of the important *Kitab-i Iqan*; cf. Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Bethesda, MD:

University Press of Maryland, 2000, chs. 4-5; Sours, *Prophecies*, passim. In fact, the *Kitab-i Iqan* is wedded to the *Book of Daniel* insofar as, in Shoghi Effendi's interpretation, the *Iqan* is nothing less than the revelation in which the apocalyptic seals of the *Book of Daniel* (Daniel 12:8) was broken; cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 139.

<sup>277</sup> Cf. Gen 5:22; Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*. Leiden, NL: Brill, 1998, 156-158.

<sup>278</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, in *Tablets*, 148n1; Keven Brown, "Hermes Trismegistos and Apollonius of Tyana in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh," in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives in Bahá'í Theology*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997, 153-188.

<sup>279</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, ##112, 121.

<sup>280</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #9; Hornby, *Lights*, #1696.

<sup>281</sup> Cf. Guy Beck, ed., *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*. Albany: State of New York University Press, 2005, ch. 1.

<sup>282</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, #22; Lambden, *Aspects*, 42-45.

<sup>283</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #79.

<sup>284</sup> Cf. Lambden, *Aspects*, 40: for instance, the term "the Adam of Reality."

<sup>285</sup> While it may have been the case that Docetism, which wanted to rescue the divine from the evil creation and Christ from the defilement of bodily existence, lived on in the Qur'anic mentioning, or at least, post-Qur'anic interpretation, of the cross, seemingly denying the historicity of the death of Jesus on the cross (Qur'an 4:147), Bahá'u'lláh always accepted this historicity and, hence, was opposed to such a dualistic rendering of the divinity of Manifestations in relation to their historical human existence, but without taking away from their universal spiritual nature representing the Primal Will or Mind; cf. Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009; Cole, "Behold the Man," 60-64.

<sup>286</sup> The question, here, is not about the exact form of such an emanation—differentiating between incarnation or appearance, manifestation or revelation, theophany or epiphany—but that the *intention* of the emanation of the Primal Reality from the unmanifest Godhead Beyond is to manifest its Self and realize the infinity of divine attributes that links the transcendent and immanent divine in such way that they are one and, hence, that the world of creation with its impermanence and physicality is not an evil or unnecessary or irrelevant side effect of eternity, but the explication of the whole process of revelation and emanation—something

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has fathomed with the cycle or arc of decent and ascent; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, ##53-54; Saied, *Logos*, ch. 2.

<sup>287</sup> Cf. Juan Cole, “‘I am all the Prophets’: The Poetics of Pluralism in Bahá’í Texts,” in *Poetics Today* 14:3 (1993): 447-76. Hence, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s often repeated emphasis of the spiritual reality of manifestations and all prophetic figures; cf. SAQ #23. The same could be said in this context of other religious founders and spiritual figures throughout history—one might think of Guru Nanak and Sikhism, Mahavira and Jainism—namely that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, who/that makes them what they are in their spiritual station; cf. Stockman, *Bahá’í Faith*, 38.

<sup>288</sup> Cf. Sours, *Syllable*, chs. 1-2; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #87. The symbolic meaning is the *true* meaning, the spiritual reality, not an “allegorical spiritualization” of reality that is understood to be material in nature; cf. Corbin, *Alone*, 105-135.

<sup>289</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #4; Julio Savi, *Towards the Summit of Reality: An Introduction to the Study of Baha'u'llah's Seven Valleys and Four Valley*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2008, 37-38.

<sup>290</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #79.

<sup>291</sup> The “Sabians” of Harran seem to have used this corpus as scriptural evidence for being “people of the book” under Islamic rule. “Apocalyptic” as a qualification does not necessarily indicate precognition of a divinely determined future, but also includes literatures that claim to be able to “see” the higher spiritual realms or even travel in them to reveal its secrets.

<sup>292</sup> Cf. the 1<sup>st</sup> *Book of Enoch*; Chrys Caragounis, *The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 83-119.

<sup>293</sup> Cf. Brown, “Hermes Trismegistos,” 153-188.

<sup>294</sup> Cf. Gilles Quispel, *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica: Collected Essays of Gilles Quispel*. ed. by Johannes van Oort. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2008; 19-21, 33, 155, 593, et alia.

<sup>295</sup> Cf. Kitty Ferguson, *Pythagoras: His Lives and the Legacy of a Rational Universe*. London: Icon Books, 2010, 186.

<sup>296</sup> Cf. Juan Cole, “Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom,” in *World Order* 13:3 (1979):24-39.

<sup>297</sup> Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Lawh-i Hikmat*, in *Tablets*, 146.

<sup>298</sup> Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #3; Sours, *Station*, ch. 6. In order not to misunderstand this in a triumphalist way, which easily can happen and, in fact, has happen with the emphasis on the exclusivity of “lastness” in other dispensations, Shoghi Effendi attributes the greatness of Bahá’u’lláh not to the inherent difference in station between him and other



Manifestations, but to the time in which a Manifestation happens and its potentials to be harvested; cf. Fazel, "Pluralism," 42- 43.

- <sup>299</sup> As a prophet who brought a book, the Qur'anic John the Baptizer would have to be considered as a major prophet; in the Bahá'í writings however, he appears as a minor prophet preparing the way for a mayor prophet, Jesus; cf. Cole, "Behold the Man," 52; yet compare with Lambden, *Aspects*, 55, 58-60.
- <sup>300</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Uncompounded Reality*, in Momen, 203-21.
- <sup>301</sup> Cf. Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 24-26.
- <sup>302</sup> Cf. The Báb, *Persian Bayan*, Wahid III:3, in Momen, *Selections*, 339-340.
- <sup>303</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Days*, #42 (207), #44 (216-217).
- <sup>304</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Days*, #6 (27); *Gleanings*, #14. In most ancient religions, the inhaling and exhaling process and symbolism appears in one way or another as that of the Spirit-breath that binds the creation and annihilation process of the cosmos together into one movement of cyclical renewal. It stands behind the eastern (Hindu) and western (Stoic) expressions of the world conflagration, but, reduced to one linear process, is also behind the biblical creation Spirit (*ruah*), universally appearing in the pre-creation verse of the *Book of Genesis* (Genesis 1:2) and specifically as breath of life blown from the nostrils of God into the bodies of living beings (Genesis 2:7, 7:22; Job 27:3), and its eschatological resumption into God, specifically by taking back the spirit of life of individual beings (Psalm 104:9; Ecclesiastes 12:7) and universally in the conflagration of the world in the Psalms (Psalm 18:8) and at or after the universal judgment in the *Book of Revelation* (20:4). In some meditation technics, the movement of breathing reappears as the most basic bodily expression of the harmonization of individual and cosmic existence. Yet, it can also become the expression of the ultimate metaphysical movement of unification and differentiation, addressing the ancient problem of the one and the many; cf. Faber, *God as Poet*, 40.
- <sup>305</sup> Cf. The Báb, *Persian Bayan*, Wahid II, in Momen, *Selections*, 325-338.
- <sup>306</sup> It is a standard argument of Bahá'u'lláh, appearing in diverse tablets, that, after answering questions regarding other religions and Manifestations, the reference to them remains only relevant *if* the seeker embraces the *new* Manifestation by the appearance of which they become irrelevant if they cannot be related to this novelty in which they are also embraced; cf. Juan Cole, "Bahá'u'lláh on Hinduism and Zoroastrianism: The Tablet to Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Concerning the Questions of Manakji Limji Hataria," @ [http://bahaistudies.net/hindu\\_zoro.html](http://bahaistudies.net/hindu_zoro.html).
- <sup>307</sup> This was a trend probably set in motion by Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*. Boston: Shambala, 1975.

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- <sup>308</sup> Cf. Whitehead, *Process*, 3-18; Faber, *Becoming of God*, Sphere 2; *God as Poet*, part 1.
- <sup>309</sup> Cf. Bonnie J. Taylor, *One Reality: The Harmony of Science and Religion*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2013, ch. 1. This is also a major concern of Bahá'í thought as reflected in many scriptural passages, elevating this resonance to a foundational Bahá'í principle; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawh-i Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, in *Tablets*, #9; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #44. The independent investigation of truth, although hitherto not as defined in the Bahá'í universe of discourse as a condition of the cooperation between science and religion, *is*, in fact, the effort of philosophy; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, PT, #41.
- <sup>310</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996, 141.
- <sup>311</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #72; *Questions*, #20.
- <sup>312</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, ##5, 69.
- <sup>313</sup> Cf. Taylor, *One Reality*, ch. 4.
- <sup>314</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, ##36, 55.
- <sup>315</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #15.
- <sup>316</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2002, Persian, #29; *Gleanings*, ##5, 90, 153; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, #21; *Promulgation*, #4.
- <sup>317</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, #58.
- <sup>318</sup> Cf. SAQ #47; 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Taylor, *One Reality*, 88-91; PUP #79.
- <sup>319</sup> Cf. David Palmer and Xun Liu, eds., *Daoism in the Twentieth Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; and David Palmer and Elijah Siegler, *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality*. Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2017.
- <sup>320</sup> Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, #1, 47, 69.
- <sup>321</sup> Cf. Faber, "Becoming Intermezzo," 212-238; *Divine Manifold*, ch. 14.
- <sup>322</sup> Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Days*, #10; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, #91.
- <sup>323</sup> Cf. Faber, *Garden*, chs. 7-9.

# Freedom and the Baha'i Writings

Ian Kluge

## Part 1: Introduction

Few subjects in the post-Enlightenment world are as vociferously — and even violently — contested as freedom. Appeals to freedom permeate modern societies in everything from banal advertisements for personal care products, automobiles and financial services to far-reaching and passionate public debates about the scope of free speech and personal autonomy; freedom of religion; freedom and the community; economic freedom and the existence of human free will. Indeed the enormous importance of freedom can be seen in the history of the twentieth century insofar as freedom and antagonistic concepts of freedom were one of the underlying issues in four major conflicts. World War II (1939–1945), and the subsequent Cold War (1945–1989) were concerned with rival theories of freedom as espoused by Fascism, Communism and democratic capitalism. In the Korean War (June, 1950–July 1953) the Communist and democratic capitalist visions of freedom clashed again, this time without a clear victory for either side and with the establishment of two rival states representing the competing theories of freedom.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, that these conflicts show is that differing concepts of freedom are able to incite conflicts that involve countless millions of humans. Following WWII, various visions of national, political and social freedom inspired various — often violent — struggles of national decolonization in former African and Asian territories.

Depending on what one counts as a national war of liberation, these wars lasted into the 1960s and even 1970s early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

However, struggles for freedom have not just taken place between different countries but also between them. The American Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa are prominent examples of internal struggles for freedom that have led to widespread change within countries. By contrast, the Tiananmen Uprising in China in 1989 is an internal liberation struggle that – at least in the short term – failed. The defense of individual agency and autonomy against encroachments by established authorities were central issues. Starting in the 1960s and continuing until the present, the counter-culture movement made enormous changes in American and European culture. It sought greater freedom for alternative individual lifestyles and approaches to social problems. Later, the feminist movement demanded – and still demands – more freedom for women, and the LGBTQ movement actively agitates for the freedom to express alternative sexualities. In the academic world, postmodern philosophy struggles for freedom against the alleged tyranny and “terrorism”<sup>3</sup> of objectivity<sup>4</sup> and objective truth, even in the sciences as well as against the concept of universal and naturally pre-determined human nature. It rejects the ‘prison’ of the established meaning of any text, be it literary or scientific. Finally, amidst this turmoil, we have the ever-present offers of spiritual freedom from religions and the Manifestations of God Who seek to “*awaken [mankind’s] spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 7] and encourage the actualization of our divinely given potentials.

While appeals to freedom permeate contemporary societies, there are considerable differences and irresolvable conflicts about what ‘freedom’ means. These differences are clearly evident in the work of philosophers such as Rousseau who taught that society by its very nature oppressed the individuals; on Kant’s theory of the categorical imperative which alone guarantees freedom; Marx who, in effect, denied free will because the individual is completely a product of the economic forces in society and Sartre, according to whom humans are absolutely free – and responsible – for creating themselves. Despite these (and many other) theories of freedom, very little has been done to bring intellectual order to this wealth of viewpoints. The notable exception is Mortimer Adler’s exhaustive two volume study *The Idea*

of *Freedom*, published in 1958, which remains the only in-depth systematic analysis and comparative study of concepts of freedom in the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>5</sup> Adler's work is especially useful to studying freedom because he is not intent on proving the superiority of any particular theory but rather to classify, compare, contrast and clarify the views of freedom held by philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell. This makes Adler's work an essential resource in assessing the concepts of freedom as presented in the Writings.

Rather than engage in conflicts about the meaning of freedom, we shall outline the requisite conditions required for a truly free act. We shall begin with an example. Driving home one dark and rainy night, we suffer a sudden spasm in the left arm. The spasm spins the wheel to the right and in so doing, we avoid a man who has just tripped and fallen in front of our car. In our view, this was not an act of free will because it fails to meet the six conditions of personal freedom.

First, *consciousness*. Freedom excludes automatic responses over which we have no conscious control. In addition, freedom requires conscious choice among alternatives.

Second, a free act requires *intent*, i.e. we must intend to do something and make a conscious choice. In other words, free will requires a conscious purpose. There is no intent in an arm spasm or any other automatic human process.

Third, conscious choice requires an *agent* who makes the choice and whose decision is not pre-determined by the law of cause and effect, or any other physical law. Without such an agent whatever is done will be result of causality, and, therefore, is not free.

Fourth, free will requires *knowledge and judgment*. A choice of two unknown alternatives is not a choice but a guess since there is no place or evaluation and no place for judgment. Without knowledge and judgment, action is reduced to stimulus-response events.

Fifth, is *will or volition*. Without at least the capacity and willingness to act, free will is reduced to stasis. Nothing gets done. This condition requires both a capacity to act and the opportunity to do so.

Sixth, the ability to *transcend the law of cause and effect* as well as other natural laws and to act according to moral, intellectual and spiritual criteria instead of being swept along by physical processes. This ability may also be the ability to abstract from concrete natural entities. For example, we abstract universal concepts such as “duckness” from observing dozens of ducks. This makes mankind an exceptional case in nature.

We must hasten to point out that the transcendence of nature has two aspects: (1) the psychological and spiritual activities of abstraction and understanding and (2) the application of abstraction and understanding to overcome nature or make use of it to our advantage. The transcendence of nature does not mean that we can physically overcome all of nature. Because “*Man is, in reality, a spiritual being “whose [attributes] belong to all men alike”* [PT 73] they have the psychological capacity to transcend nature by virtue of their special gifts that allow them to “*guide, control and overcome nature*” [PT 127].

As we shall see below, neither materialism nor compatibilism allow for free will and freedom. If all things — including humans — are material and ruled by universal causal law, then they cannot meet the foregoing criteria and, consequently, there is no place for free will. No natural phenomena we encounter can meet any of the foregoing seven conditions of free will and freedom.

This study of the Bahá’í philosophy of freedom reaches three general conclusions.

First, the Bahá’í philosophy of freedom is rational, coherent and comprehensive. It is rational because its teachings are developed according to the principles of reasoning, specifically, the law of non-contradiction.<sup>6</sup> It is coherent because the principles and teachings are interdependent and mutually supportive. Every teaching builds on its predecessor and sets the stage for its successor. We might also say that each subsequent deduction is potentially present in its predecessor. Furthermore, the Bahá’í philosophy of freedom is also coherent because its teachings are all based on certain metaphysical principles that ensure the underlying unity of its philosophy of freedom. This unity will become more apparent throughout our study. Finally, the Bahá’í Writings cover the broad spectrum of issues

about freedom such as the metaphysical basis of free will; the body and free will; consciousness, intentionality and freedom; freedom and responsibility; personal freedoms vis-à-vis community rights; legitimate limitations on personal freedom; positive and negative liberty <sup>7</sup>; circumstantial, natural and acquired freedom<sup>8</sup>; and free will and the after-life. This comprehensiveness should encourage Bahá'ís to promulgate the divine teachings about freedom by engaging in constructive dialogue with other viewpoints.

Second, the Bahá'í Writings understand freedom as spiritual, teleological and instrumental in nature. Freedom is one of mankind's divinely given spiritual capacities and achieves its highest expression in advancing our spiritual development. It is also teleological, i.e. it exists for a purpose, namely, the actualization of mankind's physical, intellectual and spiritual potentials. Such progress is, after all, the purpose of all the Manifestations of God. Furthermore, in contrast to many other philosophies of freedom, the Bahá'í Writings teach that while freedom is a necessary instrument for the achievement of greater spiritual ends, it is necessary but not sufficient for human progress. Freedom is not an absolute end in itself and by itself does not lead to progress that is appropriate to human nature. The Manifestations are must provide the needed spiritual guidance.

Finally, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom includes – and possibly originates – at least two original arguments about the basis of free will. These arguments, while somewhat technical, are important because they not only solve two long-standing scientific and philosophical problems but, more important, they further show the untenability of materialist and determinist positions on free will. The first of these provides a new solution to the mind-body problem whereas the second demonstrates the impossibility of mind-brain identity theory there by showing the necessity of invoking non-physical entities to explain certain brain functions.

## Part 2: The Theoretical Foundations

In order to understand, evaluate and appreciate the philosophy of freedom it is necessary to ensure at least some familiarity with the complexity of the subject as well as with the three basic foundational choices all theories of freedom must make either implicitly or

explicitly. These foundations determine the answers to many of the essential questions about freedom. We can adopt the world-view of materialism or its sub-type compatibilism or we can accept transcendentalism. Materialism or physicalism asserts that reality is entirely physical and that non-physical entities or processes do not and cannot exist. It also claims that all natural processes can be explained by the law of cause and effect. Compatibilism accepts materialism but contends that free will and causality does not deny freedom. Transcendentalism<sup>9</sup> claims that reality is not entirely physical – or in some cases is not physical at all – and that the law of cause and effect does apply to non-material things. The Bahá'í Writings represent a form of transcendentalism.

One of the best ways to comprehend the complexity of free will and freedom is to examine one of the simplest and most commonly assumed beliefs about freedom as stated by Bertrand Russell: “freedom in general may be defined as the absence of obstacles to the realization of desires.”<sup>10</sup> In short, freedom is getting our way or self-determination without external or internal interference. Straight forward appearances notwithstanding, careful analysis reveals the highly problematical of this definition. Does this apply to all desires? Are obstacles necessarily always denials of freedom? Contrary to Russell, the Bahá'í Writings point out that some obstacles and the tests needed to overcome them are not denials of freedom but rather gateways to a new and higher freedom. How does Russell's definition allow us to distinguish worthwhile from worthless freedoms? If so, what are we to make of conscience or the frustration of the desire to beat up an extremely noisy neighbor? Or, what counts as an ‘obstacle’? Is an internal attack of conscience about an intended act an ‘obstacle’? Are all freedoms appropriate for humans? Few people would assert that the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek Cynic philosophers Hipparchia and her husband Crates extend human freedom by living publically like dogs even in their intimacies. John Stuart Mill made the point of appropriate freedoms by stating, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”<sup>11</sup> Already at this point it is clear that Russell's definition is not as straight-forward as it appears and reveals hidden depths.



Russell's views on freedom implicitly assume that the scientific materialist world-view is true. Thus, answers to questions of freedom do not have to consider factors such as the existence of the soul or an afterlife in which we must take responsibility for our free acts. Neither does it require a choice between material and spiritual advantage nor balancing positive and negative liberty<sup>12</sup> nor freedom for the community.

The foregoing issues show that these and other questions about freedom can only be answered in the context of a theory of human nature. However, the philosophy of human nature is embedded in metaphysics which is the study of the nature and structure of reality as a whole. As we shall observe in what follows, a significant number of answers about freedom have their roots in metaphysical viewpoints. In other words, all philosophies of human nature and freedom are implicitly or explicitly based on a fundamental metaphysical choice about the nature of reality. Either we adhere to some form of materialism or to some form of non-materialism.

Materialism or physicalism as it is now called "is the thesis that everything is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes put it, that everything supervenes on the physical. The thesis is usually intended as a metaphysical thesis."<sup>13</sup> It can assume a variety of forms but the common denominator is that reality is exclusively physical and has no non-physical aspects. All real things can be sensed directly or indirectly by the physical senses or their technological extensions of our senses. All physical things or processes are subject to measuring, quantifying (results) experimenting, objective verification and prediction. Any seeming exceptions such as thoughts, feelings, consciousness, subjective experiences and intentions can be reduced to and explained by purely physical explanations. Therefore, souls, spirits, Platonic forms, selves, minds, purposes, intrinsic values, consciousness or deities do not and cannot exist. Matter and material processes cannot give rise to non-material entities such as mind, soul and self, i.e. matter has no potential for the emergence of non-material entities. Claims that matter has such potentials are, in effect, no longer consistently materialist because they accept the existence of at least some non-material entities or processes. For materialism, any entity or process that appears 'ideal'

is either an “illusion”<sup>14</sup> or reducible to a physical process by the scientific method.<sup>15</sup>

According to materialism there is no free will; it is an illusion.<sup>16</sup> This is because everything in the universe is strictly subject to the law of cause and effect.<sup>17</sup> In other words, every action – whether external or internal to us – has a necessary pre-determined and pre-determining cause that can be traced (at least in theory) back to the Big Bang. Hence this view is known as “determinism.” There are no uncaused events or events that somehow cause themselves, i.e. no spontaneous events. All events and their attributes can be traced to pre-existing causes<sup>18</sup> which means that no cause can spontaneously, i.e. without a pre-existing cause arise by itself and start a new causal chain. Each event necessarily has an antecedent cause determines its nature which in turn, determines its successor. Consequently, there is no place for free will because every decision and action is the result of an indeterminably long chain of cause and effect that pre-determines what will happen. Philosopher Richard Taylor points out that

it is a consequence of determinism that these [my inner mental, emotional or volitional state] whatever they are at any time, can never be other than what they are. Every chain of causes and effects . . . is infinite.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, regardless of how far back we go, there is no starting point that is free from the pre-determining law of cause and effect. This means that nature – including human nature – has no agency, i.e. no independent power to initiate or terminate action. Everything, including human thought, decisions and acts, is what it is because the laws of causality extend infinitely – or to the Big Bang – and cannot be suspended or eliminated. If either happened, we would be faced with a miracle.<sup>20</sup> Without a belief in miracles, i.e. a suspension or elimination of causality human beings cannot act differently than they do. In a sense, we are organic robots or zombies who are simply particular expressions of the laws of physics.

The foregoing outline of materialism makes it clear that it cannot even meet the most basic requirements of free will and freedom. As shown above, free will requires consciousness, an agent to make a choice; intention; knowledge of the alternatives; volition or the desire

to carry out an action; and judgment to know the potential consequences; the ability to transcend causality i.e. spirituality. None of these attributes are connected with matter or physical processes in any way or can be deduced from them. We shall see more about this below.

The practical consequences of the materialist and scientific metaphysics are startling. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “*sharing is a personally chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor . . . but of their own free will, and not because the poor have gained this end by force*” [SWAB 115, emphasis added]. In effect, the materialist view asserts that my decision to buy a homeless man a meal has already been pre-determined at a nano-second after the Big Bang. It is only a matter of the causal chain from then to the moment of my offer to play itself out. All the events leading from the initial explosion to my paying for his meal made ‘my’ action inevitable. There is no such thing as free will, my act really has no intrinsic and objective value since I am no more than a robot, a zombie or a puppet. In short, with materialism, ethics evaporates.

To salvage free will (and value and virtue) from scientific materialism and determinism, some thinkers adopt a position known as ‘compatibilism’ or “soft determinism”<sup>21</sup> which claims that materialism and causal determinism are compatible with freewill. Compatibilism agrees with the scientific view that causality operates everywhere – including our brains. Our “inner causation” based on our “beliefs and desires give us the in-put – and thereby, at least a share – in decision making. According to compatibilists, mankind still has freedom because

human actions can be caused but still free. Free actions are not uncaused actions but are actions that are closely linked with an agent’s inner causation through one’s own beliefs and desires . . . For freedom is in contrast with coercion or constraint rather than with having a cause. *That my action is causally constrained does not entail that I am constrained to do it* [and] that I am not causally free.<sup>22</sup>

Compatibilism argues that causes, unlike coercion and constraint, are not intrinsically opposed to freedom. From this it follows that in

some way, causality can lead to free actions because the causal process based on our beliefs and ideas can actively intervene and ‘make our personal mark’ on the causal process unfolding within us.

There are at least three major problems with this attempt to save free will in the scientific world-view. First, an idea or belief is either a part of a pre-existing causal chain or it is a spontaneous, i.e. uncaused event. Scientific materialism denies the spontaneous causes since every event comes from a pre-existing cause; there are no uncaused events. In other words, beliefs are part of an ‘infinite’ causal chain like all other things and processes, and, consequently, there is no reason to believe that our ideas are any different. The fact that they pass through our brains does not endow them with the six conditions for free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend cause and effect. In other words, the causal chain associated with beliefs and ideas is not really ‘ours.’

Second, if humans are really to have free will there must be a suspension of the necessary causal laws so that a free act that is not pre-determined by a previous cause can come into existence and influence or direct the whole process. This extremely anomalous concept of causality, is impossible to harmonize with scientific theory and practice – and for good reason. The implications can be startling. For example, if we accept this non-necessary concept of causality, it will be difficult to deny the possibility of miracles which are precisely such momentary suspensions of causal laws. Such violations of natural law were the core of Hume’s argument against miracles.<sup>23</sup>

The third problem was already noted by Kant, who wrote that compatibilism “wretched subterfuge” and “petty word-jugglery”<sup>24</sup> His point is that replacing ‘causality’ with ‘coercion’ or ‘constraint’ achieves nothing because, in effect, they all mean the same – compulsion. Saying that causality allows freedom but that coercion does not explain why and how causality is able to ‘leave room’ for spontaneous, i.e. undetermined events.

Over the last three decades, a new form of compatibilism – ‘quantum compatibilism’ – has developed<sup>25</sup> to solve the problem of spontaneous cause events. Its basic argument is that the strict laws of

cause and effect apply to individuals and groups at the macroscopic, i.e. the daily levels of reality and, thereby, forbid freedom of the will. However, at the sub-atomic, i.e. quantum realm this is not the case. At the sub-atomic level, scientists can only describe the probability of a particle behaving in a certain way at a particular time but they cannot make an exact prediction of any specific particle. They can only calculate the probability of a particle doing one thing or another. In other words, this 'quantum behavior' is non-deterministic or 'random.' Some scientists and philosophers this randomness provides 'wiggle room' for consciousness and free will.<sup>26</sup> However, this idea creates at least serious problems with understanding free will.

The first problem with quantum compatibilism is that free will is not in itself randomness. Free will, as shown above, requires consciousness, an agent to make a choice, an agent to make a choice; knowledge of the alternatives; intention or teleology; a capacity to transcend causal laws; volition or the desire to carry out an action; and judgment to know the potential consequences. The randomness of some sub-atomic particles cannot even meet the most basic requirements for free will and freedom nor can we derive the attributes of free will from randomness. None of the qualities of consciousness can be conjured out of the mere absence of causal laws and there is nothing about the nature of sub-atomic particles that suggests they could be. Neither can these qualities be derived from unpredictability. Indeed, if these qualities were present, we would no longer be dealing with the scientific concept of matter.

The second problem of the quantum free will proposal is raised by quantum compatibilist Ching-Hung Woo:

In quantum physics the so-called probability amplitude evolves according to deterministic laws but the transformation from many possible outcomes to one actual outcome takes place purely by *chance*. The statistical distribution for such *chance* events follows strict rules, but the outcome of an individual chance event is unpredictable and *cannot be controlled by will*. Thus any decision is either the predictable result of earlier causes (which may include quantum chance events) and is not free from determinism, or

is itself a quantum *chance* event and is *not willed*. Either way, the free will we commonly take for granted is absent. What then is the freedom to choose that we so cherish and which politicians like to invoke at every opportunity?<sup>27</sup>

This passage identifies another difficulty with quantum compatibilism: random events happen only by chance and chance “cannot be controlled by will.” This means there is, in effect, no free will<sup>28</sup> since the whole point of free will is to achieve control and achieve certain desired goals. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that humans are different from — and above — nature precisely because they have free will, i.e. control over nature. He points out,

*according to natural law these mysteries [of nature] should remain latent, hidden; but man has proceeded to break this law, free himself from this rule . . . Therefore, he is the ruler and commander of nature.* [PUP 17]

The third problem raised by quantum compatibilism is that there is no reason to identify impersonal random processes with a person or agent or self who can make free decisions. Quantum randomness has no attributes that allow identification with a self or “*rational soul*” [SAQ 66:2] and its personal freedom. Without the active capacity of an agent or self, there are only bare events and no intended personal actions. Consequently, without a necessary connection to personal free will, the quantum concept of free will cannot refer to us as individuals.

Finally, it bears repeating that random quantum processes are no less material than the macrocosmic variety. From the perspective of contemporary science, no matter how they are described, physical processes do not have the potentials for the emergence of non-physical entities or processes such as agents and consciousness. As noted above, if it is claimed that matter has such non-physical aspect it is clear that the kind of matter we are referring to is not the matter of modern physics.

The remaining world-view related to the free will issue is what we shall refer to as ‘transcendentalism’ which can exist in a variety of forms.<sup>29</sup> Whatever their other differences, they all share certain fundamental principles. The first is the existence of non-material

entities or processes are part of or all of or originators of reality. This leads to the second fundamental principle that scientific materialism cannot provide adequate explanations of the phenomenal world. To understand the phenomenal world we will inevitably need to refer to non-material entities such as God or a ground of being, Platonic Ideas, Aristotelian Forms, potentials [SAQ 51:4-5], teleology or mind. Some forms of transcendentalism, like Plato's, assert that the physical world has a lesser degree of reality and is only a shadow of an ideal supersensible world which is the origin of reality. Aristotle – and the Writings – maintains that all things are composed of matter and form which gives the matter its particular attributes.<sup>30</sup> Form transcends matter. This form of transcendentalism is found in the Bahá'í Writings.<sup>31</sup> Plotinus taught that the entire phenomenal world was the result of the overflow of God's goodness.<sup>32</sup> Other forms of transcendentalism such as Berkeley's subjective idealism assert that reality is entirely mental<sup>33</sup> since all our experiences and knowledge are mental. Kicking a rock does not prove the existence of the rock but only our personal sensation or 'idea' of the rock.

From a transcendental view point, non-physical entities as souls, minds, spirit, mind, forms and values are real whereas in scientific materialism they are not and can be reduced to physical processes. Transcendentalism is obviously compatible with belief in a superior being and with teleology both in mankind and nature. It also forms the basis for belief in values and morals as real, independent entities and not merely personal or collective opinion. Most important perhaps, is its compatibility with the concept of a non-material 'self' which by its very nature is not totally enmeshed in the causal law of nature. This also establishes the basis for belief in immortality and spiritual progress after death.

### **Part 3: The Ontology and Psychology of Freedom**

The Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is grounded in the metaphysical and psychological teachings found in the Writings. Human free will is based on the teaching that the "rational soul" which is the essence of mankind [SAQ 55:5] is a substance in the Aristotelian sense.<sup>34</sup> In other words, it is not an attribute, property or quality of anything else and that it ontologically separate and distinct from other things and in that sense is independent from them. Moreover it can take action, i.e.

it has agency.<sup>35</sup> For example, we do not see qualities like ‘fluffy,’ ‘white’ and ‘hopping’ just by themselves; they do not exist independently. However, we do see them as attributes or qualities in my pet rabbit, Hopper. In short, Hopper is a substance that possesses several attributes that identify it; he is separate and distinct from other things and can take action. Hopper himself is not a quality but a substance. He is ontologically independent, i.e. separate and distinct. Neither can he be changed or reduced into an attribute or quality.

Because the Writings embody transcendental metaphysics, they also recognize the existence of non-material or spiritual substances. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that mankind

*even understands things that have no outward existence, that is, intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities such as the mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities, love and sorrow – all of which are intelligible realities. [SAQ 48:4]*

They are also called “*intellectual realities*” [TAB1 208; cf. SAQ]. Materialist metaphysics, of course, cannot recognize these “intelligible realities” as non-material substances or processes because the materialist paradigm requires all things to be reducible to physical things or events. In contrast, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shows that the rational soul is a substance, and more: it is a spiritual substance that survives the death of the body. He says,

*Some hold that the body is the substance and that it subsists by itself, and that the spirit is an accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, however, is that the rational soul is the substance through which the body subsists. If the accident – the body – is destroyed, the substance – the spirit – remains.*

There are several important steps in this argument. First, there is the fact that the rational soul is a substance that “subsists by itself” or is ontologically independent, which is to say, it is separate and distinct. Not only is each rational soul substance separate and distinct from every other but it is also a spiritual substance which in itself is free from the vicissitudes of nature. That is why it is not dependent on



the body to exist but rather has the body as an attribute while living in the material realm. Indeed, the body is an 'accidental' attribute, which means that it is not necessary for the rational soul to exist in itself though it is necessary for rational soul's life in the material world. Precisely because the rational soul has the body as an accidental attribute or quality, the soul is able to continue existing – and evolving – despite the body's demise.

Shoghi Effendi also support the soul's existence as a substance. He says that the human spirit or rational soul "continues after death in another form [and that] the human spirit is capable of infinite development."<sup>36</sup> In other words, the rational soul does not depend on its natural and social environment to exist. Its identity and existence are constant features in any settings. Shoghi Effendi re-enforces this point by adding "Man's identity or rather his individuality is never lost. His reality as a person remains intact throughout the various states of his development."<sup>37</sup> The embryo itself is a substance insofar as it is separate and distinct from other beings because (among other things) it has a unique genetic make-up, a different blood type from the mother and its own neural system.

Because the rational soul is a spiritual substance or "intellectual reality" it is inherently endowed with free will which cannot be lost or destroyed in the physical world. This means that humankind is, at least in principle, intrinsically free and is able to make choices. Only mankind is able by his spiritual power, has been able to free himself, "to soar above the world of matter and to make it his servant" [PT 21]. In other words, mankind's ability to 'transcend' or "soar above the world of matter" is one of the foundations of free will and freedom.

At this point we shall take a brief detour to answer an objection to Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on this subject. It may be argued that the rational soul which is man's substance is, contrary to the foregoing explanation, not necessarily free from material limitations. Among other things it is subject to death, sleep and various ailments [SAQ 70:3]. However, Bahá'u'lláh assures us that

*the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose*

*themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power.* [GWB 153, emphasis added]

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that soul “remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments” which is to say that in itself, the soul transcends the physical world. In itself, the soul is not subject to the laws of cause and effect or any other laws of nature. However, manifesting its spiritual and intellectual powers in the physical world requires a body – and the imperfections of the body may diminish or even prevent the soul from manifesting its capacities. Thus, *in itself*, the soul is not affected by the physical body but *in relationship* to the material world its expressions may be affected. This leads to a significant question: can the body’s restrict the soul’s expressions in the physical world? What happens to free will then? Insofar as the Bahá’í Writings recognize the effects of illness and inherent physical inadequacies, there is, in our view, little question that under certain circumstances some persons may not be able to manifest their best intentions. A brain tumor may suppress our free will. In one case, a long time teacher with an exemplary record suddenly began showing signs of pedophilia. Once his brain tumor was removed, his behavior returned to normal.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the brain tumor (which was removed) prevented his soul from manifesting its natural care for children in the material world.

### 3.1: Ontological Basis of Freedom

According to the Bahá’í Writings “*Man alone has freedom*” [PT 42] and, therefore, is an exceptional and unique being in the natural world; humans have a unique place in the order of the phenomenal world. There are foundation stones for mankind’s freedom – one is ontological and the other is epistemological. Although it is advantageous to distinguish the two intellectually, in reality the two are inter-related.

In the Writings, we observe that free will is based on a substance-attribute ontology<sup>39</sup> which analyzes all things as being either a substance or an attribute (quality). Attributes or qualities are either

essential attributes which a thing must have to be the kind of thing it is, or accidental attributes which a thing may or may not have. For example, wheels are an essential attribute of a car but the color is accidental; my truck 'Hercules' is still a truck whether it is orange or green.

Before we examine how 'Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly uses this substance-attribute ontology to prove the immortality of the soul, we must look at it in more detail. As shown in previous papers,<sup>40</sup> this passage uses the Aristotelian terminology and concepts of 'substance,' 'accident' and 'attribute.' In the Writings, substance — as in Aristotle — does not always refer to physical matter. It is a philosophical term used in the Bahá'í Writings for things that (1) are not a quality or attribute of anything else; (2) possess attributes; (3) are independent and can "*subsist*" [SAQ 276] by themselves; (4) have potentials to actualize. Each substance possesses certain attributes or qualities that identify it as a certain kind of thing and as a particular example of a certain kind of thing. 'Substance' is such an important concept in the Writings that even God is a substance: according to the Writings, the spiritual aspect of the Manifestations "*is born of the substance of God Himself*" [GWB 66]. Of course, this cannot mean that God is material but rather that He is absolutely separate and independent from everything [GWB 65], that He has certain attributes, that He is not an attribute of anything else, i.e. no one comprehends Him. Unlike other substances, God has no potentials, i.e. He is complete as He is and does not change.<sup>41</sup> Here is a natural example of 'substance.' My pet ducks Jack and Jill each have wings and a bill that identify them as ducks but each also has certain mottling patterns on the bill that identify them as unique and particular ducks. The unique mottling patterns are "accident[s] that could be changed without Jack and Jill ceasing to be ducks. Both of them exist as a separate and independent beings; one could die without the other one dying too. Furthermore, both have potentials that can be actualized; Jill can lay eggs and hatch a new brood of ducklings and Jack can father a new brood and protect it from predatory crows and the occasional rat.

Speaking of the "rational soul" 'Abdu'l-Bahá, says (see full quote above) that "... *the rational soul is the substance through which the body subsists. If ... the body is destroyed, ... the spirit remains*" [SAQ

276]. In other words, the human essence, i.e. rational soul, is a spiritual and not physical entity and the body is a temporary accidental attribute in the material realm. Accidental attributes can be changed without negating the substance itself which is why the human substance, the rational soul is immortal and the body is not.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also refers to the rational soul; human spirit and mind are what He calls “intelligible realities which have no outward form or place and which are not sensible. He states,

*the power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes. These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see them, the smell does not sense them, the taste does not detect them, the touch does not perceive them . . . Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. [SAQ 93, emphasis added]*

“*The power of the soul is free*” [TAF 8]. Unlike animals it is not necessarily subject to nature — unless of course, mankind uses its freedom to enslave itself to nature.

*The animal creation is captive to matter, God has given freedom to man. The animal cannot escape the law of nature, whereas man may control it, for he, containing nature, can rise above it. [PT 38]*

Therefore, the “rational soul” is not subject to natural cause-and-effect and, therefore, is not part of the physical natural world and not subject to its laws. In other words, the Writings reject both the determinist and compatibilist claim that humans — and their brains — are simply stimulus-response machines doing whatever the laws of nature require. Since the self is the brain and the brain is physical and obeys the laws of physics and bio-chemistry, there can be no deviation from these laws and therefore, free will is a delusion.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.2: The Epistemology of Freedom

The Writings say,

*Among the teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh is man's freedom: that through the Ideal Power he should be emancipated and free from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal.*<sup>43</sup>

This statement asserts that if humans cannot free themselves from the trammels of nature, they will not be able to actualize their uniquely human features [PUP 309] and behave like animals according to their unrestrained instincts. However, God has endowed humans with a special power that enables their rational souls to free themselves from captivity to nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that

*In man, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws thereof. For instance, all minerals, plants and animals are captives of nature . . . Man, however, though in body the captive of nature is yet free in his mind and soul, and hath the mastery over nature.* [TAF 9, emphasis added]

He adds,

*The animal is the captive of nature and cannot transgress the rules and laws thereof. Inman, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws thereof.* [TAF 10]

In other words, mankind's essentially spiritual nature transcends or surpasses physical creation and, therefore, has "mastery over creation."<sup>44</sup> This means that physical nature does not intrinsically rule over mankind's spiritual aspects including the "rational soul" — unless, of course, mankind chooses to let our physical, animal nature do so. To help humans avoid making this mistake,

*The Manifestations of God have come into the world to free man from these bonds and chains of the world of nature. . . .*

*The purpose of Their coming, Their teaching and suffering was the freedom of man from himself.* [PUP 186]

### 3.3: The Power of Abstraction

To help explain mankind's exceptional nature and the "Ideal" or "discovering Power" that provides humanity with freedom, 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that "*the animal . . . only knows that which is perceived by his animal senses, he cannot imagine anything in the abstract*" [PT 42], and that animals "*have no power of abstract reasoning and intellectual ideals*" [PUP 309]. This means that animal intelligence is enclosed or imprisoned in what is available to their senses, either immediately in the present or through memories of the past. They cannot transcend their completely sensible life-world or *Lebenswelt* just as humans cannot transcend the *Lebenswelt* imposed by our God-given human nature.<sup>45</sup> Unlike animals, mankind is "*distinguished above them [animals] by his conscious power of penetrating abstract realities*" [PUP 260].

The ability to abstract enables mankind to "transcend" nature and discover the essence of things (as revealed by their attributes [SAQ 59:4]) because abstraction allows us to go beyond the individual, concrete examples — such as a flock of ducks — and abstract their common attributes to arrive at the class or concept or essence of 'duckhood' by which we can identify ducks wherever we encounter them. Everything in nature is an individual — cars, stars daffodils, chairs and lobsters — and animal perception is limited to these individual things. However, each thing is also a member of a class or kind of things and abstraction enables us to identify the kind or class and understand it as far as human capacities permit. The power of abstraction allows mankind to "*penetrate the mysteries of existence*" so that "*matters of the intellect may be deduced from and conveyed through the sensible*" [SAQ 3:10]. In short, "*the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities*" [SAQ 48:6] such as ideas or essences.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Abdu'l-Bahá states that mankind "*discovereth the inherent properties of things that are the secrets of nature . . . and transfereth these hidden secrets from the invisible to the visible plane*" [TAF 11]. In other words, with abstraction humans are able to draw general conclusions about natural phenomena that are not directly available to the senses, such

as the spherical shape of the earth [PUP 357]. The animal lacks “*the reasonable perception . . . [and] cannot apprehend the ideal realities. The animal cannot conceive of the earth as a sphere*” [PUP 357]. By “reasonable perception” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá means that human perception can apply the laws of reason to what they observe to make inferences, anticipate events and plan responses.<sup>47</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá summarizes this teaching:

*Although man shares the same outward powers and senses in common with the animal, there exists in him an extraordinary power of which the animal is deprived. All sciences, arts, inventions, crafts, and discoveries of realities proceed from this singular power. This is a power that encompasses all created things, comprehends their realities, unravels their hidden mysteries, and brings them under its control. It even understands things that have no outward existence, that is, intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities such as the mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities, love and sorrow – all of which are intelligible realities.* [SAQ 49:5]

Because humanity is not necessarily subject to nature, it has the freedom to evolve intellectually, socially and spiritually and to “*to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214] as commanded by Bahá'u'lláh. In other words, the entire project of progressive revelation depends on mankind's free will, as do individual and collective ethics, creativity in the arts and objectivity in the sciences and humanities.<sup>48</sup> Without free will we cannot exist as humans.

The second reason mankind has free will is the rational soul or human spirit which no other species possesses and, therefore, is the identifying feature or essence of the human race. “*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 55:5]. This spirit or soul identify humanity's essential exceptionality in the phenomenal world. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings*” [PT 22]. He elaborates this theme by adding that “*The human spirit consists of the rational, or logical, reasoning faculty, which*

apprehends general ideas and things intelligible and perceptible” [TAB1 115, emphasis added]. “General ideas” are abstractions from numerous particulars such as the concept of ‘chairs’ or ‘dogs’ or ‘empiricism.’ It should be recalled that “apprehend[ing] general ideas” is part of the process of abstraction which frees mankind from entrapment in nature. Furthermore,

*This spirit . . . discovers their realities and becomes aware of the properties and effects, the characteristics and conditions of earthly things. But the human spirit, unless it be assisted by the spirit of faith, cannot become acquainted with the divine mysteries and the heavenly realities.* [SAQ 55:5, emphasis added]

The foregoing observations show the close connection between free will, the human spirit or rational soul, the power of abstraction and our spiritual capacities. Without the human spirit and its ability to abstract, humankind would remain a prisoner of nature and, like other beings, lack freedom. Of course, the rational soul requires assistance from “*the spirit of faith*” to comprehend spiritual truths that are not available from a study of nature alone. These truths are trans-rational, i.e. they require ways of knowing other than inferential reason along with the “*awakening [of our] spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 9].

The inherent freedom of the rational soul has several important consequences for the Bahá’í philosophy of freedom. First, it means that without freedom, humans cannot truly be themselves and are, therefore, condemned to live inauthentically. This situation distorts their natural God-given character insofar as humans develop an image of themselves as weak, unfree victims ‘fated’ or compelled by their nature and living as mere instruments of superior forces. This encourages a passive or victim mind-set and denial of personal responsibility. These negative attributes directly hinder “*carry[ing] forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214] because they create more obstacles to overcome. However such hindrance is exactly the logical consequence of a materialist meta-physics which see mankind as totally embedded in and controlled by natural forces and laws like a puppet or a (philosophical) zombie.<sup>49</sup> This, in turn, obstructs the intellectual and spiritual progress of the individual and



his/her society. Furthermore, without freedom and especially freedom from nature, people are not living as God intended them to, or, conversely, they are living against God's will for humankind and, therefore, inauthentically. Without authenticity or at least the struggle for authenticity spiritual development is impossible.

## Part 4: Free Will and Moral Agency

The capacity for free will and exercising agency is essential to the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature and freedom. Because the "rational soul" is a substance with free will, it requires no antecedent physical stimulus to act, which is to say, it can cause its own action. Causing its own action is precisely what materialist philosophies deny insofar as in their view, no events have free will or agency. All events are the results of pre-determined external causes and lead to pre-determined consequences. There can be no alternatives to what actually happens. The law of cause and effect is supreme.

In the following statement, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out some of the ways humans may choose to initiate action (agency) without a foregoing physical stimulus.

*It is evident therefore that man is ruler over nature's sphere and province. Nature is inert, man is progressive. Nature has no consciousness, man is endowed with it. Nature is without volition and acts perforce whereas man possesses a mighty will. Nature is incapable of discovering mysteries or realities whereas man is especially fitted to do so. Nature is not in touch with the realm of God, man is attuned to its evidences. Nature is uninformed of God, man is conscious of Him. Man acquires divine virtues, nature is denied them. Man can voluntarily discontinue vices, nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts. Altogether it is evident that man is more noble and superior; that in him there is an ideal power surpassing nature. He has consciousness, volition, memory, intelligent power, divine attributes and virtues of which nature is completely deprived, bereft and minus; therefore man is higher and nobler by reason of the ideal and heavenly force latent and manifest in him. [PUP 178, emphasis added]*

Mankind cannot possess these attributes passively; instead, they are potentials until we choose to actualize or activate them. For example, ruling nature does not just happen — it is the result of choices and actions. Being progressive does not just happen to us — it is something we must actively choose. Mysteries are uncovered by the choice to explore and divine virtues do not attach themselves to us like limpets but must be actively sought after. In other words, each one of the attributes listed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is a human potential which must be actualized by free will. The six conditions of free will can only be activated by choice and cannot be compelled to activate by others.<sup>50</sup>

The Bahá’í Writings are primarily concerned with ethical free will since human morality and spirituality are the foundations of progress. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that

*[c]ertain 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. [SAQ 70:3]*

Mankind is not omnipotent in the material world and vis-à-vis events like death, illness or bad luck, mankind is practically powerless. However, in regards to ethical issues, the capacity to act ethically is always there — though doing so is not always easy. In a similar vein Bahá’u’lláh decrees that “*the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself*” [GWB 143] which is say the rational soul has agency in regards to belief in God. Even in countries like Soviet Russia with an ideologically enforced atheism it is still possible to have a silent but heart-felt faith in God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adds that “*all the doings of man are sustained by the power of divine assistance, but the choice of good or evil belongs to him alone*” [SAQ 70:7]. He adds that “*the choice of good and evil belongs to man, but that under all circumstances he is dependent upon the life-sustaining assistance of Divine Providence*” [SAQ 70:3]. Furthermore, he says, “*he [man] is free in the choice of good and evil actions, and it is of his own*

*accord that he performs them*" [SAQ 70:3]. In other words, we 'make ourselves' by our choices.

By their guidance, the Manifestations remind us that spiritual choices are necessary for progress.

*No matter how much man may acquire material virtues, he will not be able to realize and express the highest possibilities of life without spiritual graces. God has created all earthly things under a law of progression in material degrees, but He has created man and endowed him with powers of advancement toward spiritual and transcendental kingdoms. He has not created material phenomena after His own image and likeness, but He has created man after that image and with potential power to attain that likeness. He has distinguished man above all other created things.* [PUP 302]

Making non-spiritual choices our development as individuals and collectives is retarded and distorted. The challenge is to activate the "potential power" to re-make ourselves in the spiritual image of God. To help us meet this challenge Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us "*Release yourselves, O nightingales of God, from the thorns and brambles of wretchedness and misery, and wing your flight to the rose-garden of unfading splendor*" [GWB 319, emphasis added]. The call to "Release yourselves" emphasizes our capacity to use our free will and take action.

In other words, we must remember that freedom and the exercise of free will are, by themselves, not sufficient for an advancing civilization. Without spirituality, progress would remain on the material level and, thereby, be incomplete and incapable of raising mankind above the animal level. This is because both the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature and the embedded philosophy of freedom are based on mankind's essential spiritual nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that "*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*" [PT 73]. If nothing else, that "spiritual longing[s]" are an integral part of human nature and must be satisfied in one way or another if we are to live authentically or devise a genuinely workable philosophy of freedom. Without the genuine freedom to fulfill our God-given "spiritual longing[s],"

mankind's existence would be irrational and, as Sartre says, "a useless passion."<sup>51</sup> The Writings also teach that human nature, i.e. our inherent capacities and potentialities is bestowed by God on all human beings regardless time, place or historical circumstances.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, human nature is teleological, i.e. is part of a personal and collective evolutionary and progressive process. This provides mankind with intrinsic goals to attain.

## Part 5: Freedom and the Manifestations, Progressive Revelation, and Ethics

The Bahá'í Writings require free will in order to support at least five of its foundational teachings. First, free will is necessary for human beings to be human. As shown above, it is an intrinsic aspect of the rational soul which is capable of transcending nature. On this issue at least the Writings agree with of Jean-Paul Sartre who writes, "there is no determinism — man is free, man is freedom . . . man is *condemned to be free*."<sup>53</sup> If humans try to escape from their freedom, i.e. the lack of free will would reduce them to the status of animals. They would become bio-chemical robots<sup>54</sup> totally subjected to the laws of nature. Without free will, cleverly programmed robots might be able to imitate what looks like free action but true *willingness* to do anything including self-transformative change is beyond them. This is because willingness requires purpose and intention, i.e. two attributes that, according to science, matter does not have.<sup>55</sup> In short, the denial of free will undermines a crucial feature of the Bahá'í revelation, namely, the capacity to make spiritual and moral progress.

Second: without human free will, there is no need for Manifestations of God since Their guidance would not be able to initiate any voluntary changes in thinking and behavior. Why exhort people to change and improve themselves when they lack the ability to do so? Manifestations would be no more than puppet masters and the whole point of awakening "*spiritual susceptibilities*" [PUP 7] and advancing mankind's spiritual development would be lost. The same holds true for the Manifestations' teachings about societies, nations and empires. Why prophesy and warn that the Rhine will twice run red with blood if the Kaiser and Germans cannot act otherwise than they did?

The third doctrine that requires human free will is the command to teach the Faith to assist mankind. Bahá'u'lláh proclaims,

*The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.* [GWB 80]

'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "*Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is the head corner-stone of the foundation itself*" [WT 10]. The problem is that without free will it is pointless to engage in teaching efforts to inspire seekers with Bahá'u'lláh's message. If they cannot change, how can people develop a willingness to convert to new ways of thinking, acting and interpreting the world? Furthermore, public proclamations, firesides and Holy Day celebrations serve no purpose. Moreover, it also suggests that those who have seemingly chosen to become Bahá'í have only been *pre-determined* or *caused* to make this 'choice' — which makes the 'choice' morally worthless. An enforced virtue is not really a virtue at all. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, only *free* choices are ethically significant: "*Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him*" [115]. Coerced changes cannot meet any of the six criteria of free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend cause and effect. Moreover, in coerced actions, the motivating force is external to the supposedly 'free' subject. This, in turn, negates the whole concept of progressive revelation as individual and societal spiritual growth in the historical process.

Progressive revelation<sup>56</sup> — one of the signature teachings of the Bahá'í Faith — is the fourth major doctrine to be negated by the denial of free will. According to this doctrine, human history is teleological, i.e. evolving towards the future goal of "commonwealth of all the nations of the world" [WOB 40] as part of a "world federal system" [WOB 204]. Humanity's spiritual and historical development is guided by the Manifestations of God Who provide guidance that is appropriate to the needs of a particular stage of human evolution. There is, of course, no end in the succession of Manifestations because human potentials are infinite. By freely accepting the teachings of the Manifestations, we evolve as individuals and as

individuals evolve, so do their societies as well as the human race.<sup>57</sup> In short, progressive revelation includes both individual and collective moral advancement towards a unified “world commonwealth” [PB].

Free will is essential to progressive revelation — and to its correlate, the historical process leading to world unity. The reasons are given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

*Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him . . . sharing is a personally chosen righteous act.* [SWAB 115, emphasis added]

This statement leads to two conclusions. First, if an act is to have any moral value it must be the result of free will. We might also say that the freedom with which an act is done is the basis of its moral value. “[G]ood deeds voluntarily performed” are morally positive and bad deeds “voluntarily reformed” are morally wicked. In both cases, the acts have moral value whereas the pistons propelling an ambulance to save a life are amoral. The second conclusion is that moral acts must be “personally chosen,” must be the result of a free choice by an agent or self, i.e. by a rational soul that can generate motivation and action on its own without any external stimulus. The third conclusion is that genuine moral acts are “personally chosen” and, thereby connected to the agent or rational soul. Dependent acts, however, are not personal insofar as the impulsion to act comes something that is external to them. It is difficult if not impossible to explain why the rational soul should take responsibility — credit or blame — for acts that are forced upon it.

Fifth, without free will there can be no ethics<sup>58</sup> because ethics consists of making moral decisions and explaining why they are good, bad or indifferent. If these decisions are not freely made, i.e. coerced by natural laws or by other external forces, there is no decision being made and consequently, there are no ethics. There is nothing to evaluate — except a mechanical event performed by a human robot or zombie. In addition, there is no agent, self or rational soul to point out as the originator of an act; nor is there consciousness; an agent to make a choice; intention; knowledge of the alternatives; volition or the desire to carry out an action; and judgment to know the potential

consequences; the ability to transcend causality i.e. spirituality. None of these qualities are attributable to the material world.

Ethics requires an intrinsic connection between an agent or rational soul and a certain action done by *the agent* – an external force. The concept of ethics has no meaning without an explicit or implicit foundation in free will – which is why we do not charge machines with evil intentions and crimes. This is exactly where ethics based on materialism crumble because they only recognize causality and pre-determination which in turn deny free will which depends on an intrinsic connection between the agent and the act. Showing such an intrinsic connection between agent and act is the basis of assigning responsibility and of moral judgment. Without the ability to assign responsibility, i.e. without the ability to show why a particular agent is necessary and sufficient to start an event, mankind would be unable to establish ethical codes that allow or forbid certain things.

The existence of free will leads to an emphasis on individual responsibility without which ethics and societal life are impossible because no social organization is viable without (1) knowing why we did something; (2) acknowledge the act as our own; and (3) accepting the positive or negative consequences of the act. Bahá'u'lláh refers to these positive or negative consequences as “reward” and “punishment.” He declares that the “*structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment*” [GWB 218]. Elsewhere He says that

*Justice hath a mighty force at its command. It is none other than reward and punishment for the deeds of men. By the power of this force the tabernacle of order is established throughout the world, causing the wicked to restrain their natures for fear of punishment.* [TB 164]

The principle of responsibility is illustrated at the spiritual level, by God's rejection of the atheist's attempt to blame others and the zeitgeist for his disbelief in God [GWB 143]. Bahá'u'lláh decrees that “*the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself*” [GWB 143] which is say we are personally responsible for our belief or disbelief in God. All societal and legal arrangements require

responsibility for our actions in our personal lives, in our work and in the practice of citizenship. Attempts to evade free will and responsibility are in effect, attempts to abandon and/or betray the human nature has given us.

The emphasis on individual responsibility also requires us to embrace an “ethics of authenticity” i.e. we must seek to be what we’ actually are, i.e. humans with a spiritual nature and not animals. We cannot be authentic human beings if we do not accept the responsibilities entailed by our nature. In the words of Bahá’u’lláh,

*To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth. [GWB 214]*

Because we are obligated to live in a way that is appropriate to our human nature there is no real freedom — only its simulacrum — in trying to be something we are not and cannot be no matter how hard we try. Self-betrayal is not self-actualization. That is why arguments seeking to justify human behaviors such as a multiplicity of mates or homosexuality are logically invalid; they assume humans and animals are the same kinds of creatures which is not the case. In logic, this is known as a ‘category mistake.’

Because free will, responsibility, intention and authenticity are individual in nature, it follows logically that the Bahá’í teachings reject the concept of collective guilt, i.e. the notion that an individual member of an entire group can be made responsible for the misdeeds of a few or even his/her ancestors. Such blanket condemnations violate the basic principle of justice of which Bahá’u’lláh says,

*Justice, which consisteth in rendering each his due, dependeth upon and is conditioned by two words: reward and punishment. From the standpoint of justice, every soul should receive the reward of his actions, inasmuch as the peace and prosperity of the world depend thereon. [TU]*

The key to justice is giving *each* individual “the reward of *his* actions” not the reward or punishment for someone else. Collective



guilt is also an invalid concept because it renders free will useless: if we can be made responsible for things others did, then what is the purpose of using free will to make good choices? Moreover, as Bahá'u'lláh points out, this 'principle of individual responsibility' helps keep society in "peace and prosperity" because it does not undermine social unity. The proof of His wisdom is readily seen in the burgeoning of identity politics which often pit various groups against one another.

In addition, responsibility for the appropriate use of free will does not end at the personal level. We also have collective responsibilities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that

*Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation.* [PUP 292, emphasis added]

Having "responsibility in the creative plan of God," which is to say, responsibility for the good of society and the advancement of humankind, requires all persons to make the correct ethical choices in their own lives. In other words, we must be aware that we not only create our own second nature with our choices but also bear some responsibility for the spiritual progress of mankind: "*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*" [GWB 214]. In short, our responsibilities in using free will stretch beyond ourselves.

## 5.1: A Note on Free Will and Evil

There is so much to be said on the subject of free will and evil – and related subjects inevitably brought into the discussion – that we can only draw attention to some of the salient points. What is obvious that if free will is to have any meaning is that without the ability to choose evil, free will is meaningless. If mankind can only choose and do good things, then there is no moral choice and free will would not exist since there is no need for it. Furthermore, there would be no mankind since, as we have seen, free will is one of its essential attributes. However, mankind is necessary for another reason:

*If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the purpose of existence is the revelation of the divine perfections. We cannot say, then, that there was a time when man was not. At most we can say that there was a time when this earth did not exist, and that at the beginning man was not present upon it. [SAQ 50:4]*

Thus, humankind and its intrinsic free will are necessary to the cosmic order. Of course, justice also requires free will because without choices, there is no basis for assigning reward and punishment. Nor, as we have noted, can there be progressive revelation and personal spiritual progress be possible without free will.

One question about free will concerns its compatibility with progressive revelation i.e. God's plan for humanity's historical development to a federal global commonwealth. If humans are free to do evil, how can this goal be achieved? How can free will be compatible with the Bab's prayer, "*All are His servants and all abide by His bidding*" [SWB 214]? If all are God's servants, how can they carry out God's will? In our understanding, part of the answer lies in progressive revelation itself through which Manifestations – and humans if properly guided – will produce new good from previous evil. In this way, free choice is preserved for the individuals but progress is still made. That is also what we accomplish when we return good for meanness or evil. A bad act becomes the basis of a new good act.

There is much more to be said on this subject but that requires a new study dedicated to this subject alone.

## Part 6: Free Will, Justice, and Society

Without individual free will, there is no rational basis for justice, i.e. applying the appropriate consequences to actions. Bahá'u'lláh states that "*Justice . . . consisteth in rendering each his due, dependeth upon and is conditioned by two words: reward and punishment*" [TU, emphasis added]. Without free will, i.e. conscious and intentional actions there is no point to applying rewards and punishments. No one punishes machines 'misbehaving' – we repair

them instead. They cannot meet any of the six criteria for free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend cause and effect. To say we are 'rewarding' a car with an oil change is to speak metaphorically and not factually. Bahá'u'lláh adds, "*The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment*" [TU].

No society, nation or international union can function without the ability to encourage or reward positive actions and sanction or punish destructive ones. One of the major reasons for this is that humankind is constituted by a struggle between our higher, spiritual nature and our lower animal nature. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*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 . . . In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature.* [PT 60]

The threat of punishment is necessary to restrain our lower, animal natures and keep actions and words within limits that safeguard the well-being of society and to encourage actions that benefit all. Moreover, without individual free will, there is no point to reward and punishment and, therefore, no justice. "[R]endering each his due" is based on the principle that individuals are able to make real and meaningful choices and, therefore, must take personal responsibility for their actions. As we have already seen above, such concepts do not apply to machines.

Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's foregoing statements makes it clear that in the Bahá'í Writings, free will and freedom are not ends-in-themselves, i.e. final values by which other, subsidiary values are justified. The exercise of free will should not be pursued for its own sake and become its own justification. When the exercise of free will becomes its own goal and its own justification, humans find it easier to indulge irrationality and then rationalize it as the pursuit of free will even though the actions are unworthy of human nature. Celebrations of freedom for its own sake is what we find in anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin, Max Stirner and 'Red' Emma Goldman. Contemporary groups like "Free Men on the Land" are

attempts to put such absolute unnuanced libertarian concepts into practice.

In the Bahá'í Writings, the exercise of free will is an instrumental value that is justified and judged by its contribution to mankind's spiritual and material evolution. We evaluate the use of free will by its support for the actualization of our spiritual, intellectual, social and creative potentials and not simply for its exercise for its own sake. In other words, free will is subsidiary to the good – and most people understand this at least in their daily lives. 'The good' in the Writings is based on the recognition of God (see the Noonday Prayer) and the subsequent positive values of actualizing individual and societal potentials. Freedom is an important aspect of the Bahá'í outlook but it is not the ultimate value. For example, most people will voluntarily restrain their freedom of speech instead of hurting a child's feelings with a frank critique of its art work.

One of the most important – and challenging – questions about freedom is – 'What is mankind free for?' It seems clear that the most fundamental choice we have is between authenticity as "*spiritual beings*" [PT 73] and non-authenticity as slaves to our animal proclivities; between "becoming what [we] are" to paraphrase Nietzsche<sup>59</sup> and living a self-deceptive life of "bad faith"<sup>60</sup> between living up to our true potentials and living a life ruled by our animal nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*when man does not open his mind and heart to the blessing of the spirit, but turns his soul towards the material side, towards the bodily part of his nature, then is he fallen from his high place and he becomes inferior to the inhabitants of the lower animal kingdom . . . if the spiritual qualities of the soul, open to the breath of the Divine Spirit, are never used, they become atrophied, enfeebled, and at last incapable; whilst the soul's material qualities alone being exercised, they become terribly powerful – and the unhappy, misguided man, becomes more savage, more unjust, more vile, more cruel, more malevolent than the lower animals. [PT 95]*

'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that we must not only choose but choose correctly if we wish to actualize the specifically human potentials that are in the essence that is given to us a priori by God. This is the

only way to be authentic both as a member of the human species and as an individual. In other words, the Bahá'í Writings agree with the principle that “authenticity should be taken seriously as a moral ideal”<sup>61</sup> and that they embody an “ethics of authenticity.”<sup>62</sup> Our task is to make the choices and take the actions that enable us to “become what we are,”<sup>63</sup> i.e. spiritual beings: *“Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy”* [PT 73].

His statement also reminds us not to fall into the relativistic trap of thinking that all free choices are equal in nature, consequence and validity. It seems clear that the Writings advocate the ‘spiritual choice,’ the choice to actualize our higher potentials, is the only correct one because it alone is appropriate for our divinely given spiritual nature and rational soul. This concept is the basis of the statement by the Universal House of Justice that

The Bahá'í concept of human nature is teleological; that is, there are certain qualities intended by God for “human nature,” and qualities which do not accord with these are described as “unnatural” This does not mean that such aberrations may not be caused by the operations of “nature.”<sup>64</sup>

Although the denial of relativism may be rejected as ‘triumphalism,’ it must be remembered that Bahá'u'lláh recognizes that not all religions – and by extension man-made systems of thought – are worthy of recognition. He says, *“All of them religions], except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose”* [GWB 217]. In other words, Bahá'u'lláh knows there are bad choices for us and to guide us away from them is one of the reasons Manifestations appear.

## **Part 7: Some Challenges to the Bahá'í Philosophy of Freedom**

The concept of personal free will has been challenged as untenable from four perspectives: theological, ethical, scientific and philosophical. Each of these critiques can also be applied to the Bahá'í Writings and have doubtlessly been encountered by Bahá'í teachers especially in universities and colleges. Well known new

atheist authors such as Richard Dawkins,<sup>65</sup> Sam Harris<sup>66</sup> and Christopher Hitchens<sup>67</sup> make use of them, albeit often in a mangled form.

One of the major theological and philosophical challenges to the Bahá'í advocacy of free will is that God's foreknowledge of our actions prevents us from choosing freely because God's omniscience and omnipotence guarantees that His foreknowledge is correct. Our choices cannot prove God wrong because then He would be neither omniscient nor omnipotent. His infallible foreknowledge and power destroy free will. There are at least four serious difficulties which invalidate this challenge. First, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*The knowledge of a thing is not the cause of its occurrence; for the essential knowledge of God encompasses the realities of all things both before and after they come to exist, but it is not the cause of their existence. This is an expression of the perfection of God. [SAQ 156]*

There are two things to note here. Most obviously, the foreknowledge critique confuses and conflates two different orders or aspects of reality – the order of knowledge and the order of action.

Knowing something is not a cause, i.e. is not a necessary determinant because knowledge is receptive, it is received from an object and is about it. The object determines what we know about it, as, for example, a logging truck coming at us down the highway. Clearly, this knowledge does not cause the truck to crash into us – even if we have scientific instruments taking measurements that clearly predict a crash must happen according to the laws of physics. In short, knowledge itself is not causal. On the other hand, a cause is active, not receptive, it extends beyond itself to make events – like truck crashes – happen. In other words, knowledge travels *from* the object *to* the perceiver while action travels *from* the cause *to* the object.

Second, knowledge and action are essentially distinct in another way. To use 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example, all other things being equal, our knowledge that the sun will appear to rise in the east in the morning does not cause the sun to rise. A surgeon's detailed knowledge of a

procedure does not actually perform the procedure — nor can it even make her want to perform the operation. An accountant may know exactly how to ‘cook the books’ to cheat the government, but without intention, no crime takes place. What is missing, in each of these cases is intention which knowledge alone does not and cannot provide. Intention is that which bridges knowledge and action and without it, the development of action from knowledge is impossible unless, of course, humans are robots or (philosophical) zombies. The same distinction between knowledge and action applies to thinking and doing which are also ontologically distinct.

A common sense way to illustrate how foreknowledge does not cause an action is to imagine a man on a high hilltop observing a hiker in the valley below. From his elevation, the spectator knows what kind of terrain the hiker will be crossing a few hours from now — regardless of which direction the hiker chooses to take. If the hiker, is travelling along a path, the observer can even know a lot of details about what s/he is going to go through. Of course, this example has variations but they all illustrate that foreknowledge is not necessarily causation.

Third, in the foregoing quotation ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that “*God encompasses the realities of all things both before and after they come to exist.*” In other words, because He knows the essences or “*realities of all things,*” He knows their potentials and capabilities, their proclivities, their weaknesses and so on, but this does not create and mobilize the actual intention to perform good or bad deeds. God leaves that to our free will.

One of the unintended philosophical consequences of conflating knowledge and thinking with cause and action is the collapse of ethics because it ignores the essential role of intention. If we have an involuntary arm spasm and spill a cup of coffee in someone’s lap, we may be responsible in an accidental sense but are not guilty of wrongdoing. Without this distinction, every accident whether major or minor would be a misdeed — as was very often the case in Stalin’s Russia where an unlucky trucker could be shot as a saboteur. In such situations, ethics vanishes and is replaced by luck.

The fourth problem with the argument that God’s foreknowledge (and omnipotence) destroys free will is that the concept of

‘foreknowledge’ is relevant only to human beings who live in time and not to God Who is beyond time. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “*For God the beginning and the end are one and the same*” [SAQ 172]. He adds,

*God’s knowledge in the contingent world does not produce the forms of things. Rather, that knowledge is freed from the distinctions of past, present, and future, and is identical with the realization of all things without being the cause of that realization.* [SAQ 157]

As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, God’s knowledge is out of time and, therefore, exempt from foreknowledge. His knowledge is “*identical with the realization of all things*” which is to say, that God’s knowledge occurs as a human action is “realized” or carried out. This suggests that God ‘is’ in an eternal present and therefore His knowledge is contemporary with the act. In that case, God’s knowledge is also not causal, i.e. He does not coerce our free will.

The subject of God’s foreknowledge brings up the issue of predestination and fate. The Bahá’í Writings explicitly reject the concept that God predestines our spiritual lives. In “I Was a Hidden Treasure,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that

by means of rational and traditional proofs it is established and proven that [the concept of] *Predestination is erroneous and would require that the Absolute cause oppression and compulsion in Its Creation* whereas the complete justice of God is firmly established.<sup>68</sup>

He rejects predestination because it implies that God is an oppressor who overrides our free will and, thereby, turns us into puppets, robots or (philosophical) zombies. This would be unjust because it fails to treat human beings appropriately vis-à-vis their nature as free beings. More explicitly, it contradicts God’s own action of endowing mankind with free will. In addition, it also undermines God’s order in creation by eliminating one of the features distinguishing mankind from animals and with it His purpose in establishing humankind as the acme of cosmic development [SAQ 50:4].

While the Writings deny that any of our freely made moral decisions are pre-destined or fated, they do recognize that some



aspects of our lives and of nature will inevitably happen, i.e. are fated. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Fate is of two kinds: one is decreed, and the other is conditional or impending [SAQ 283]. "Decreed fate" refers to the processes of the natural world such as a lamp in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example, being extinguished when the oil is finished. Elsewhere, he cites the example of the sun and its effects on the earth [SWAB 198]. But there are countless other examples decreed fate – the inevitability of aging, the motions of the planets, the moon's gravitational effects on the sea and the water's unique trait of expanding when frozen. This kind of fate or decrees or laws of nature cannot be changed. Of course, as the creator of the laws of nature, God is ultimately in control of these natural processes which is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "*will is the active force*" [SWAB 198] that commands them. By way of contrast, "*conditional fate*" is changeable by appropriate; it refers to the vicissitudes that we can foresee and prepare for such as covering the lamp before a high wind. By means of free will we can guard against conditional events, i.e. those that may or may not happen.

From these examples, it appears that predestination and fate apply to the natural and physical world but not to the spiritual world, i.e. to the "rational soul" and mind. Our body is fated to die but our but our souls and can even decide on actions that turn nature's laws against itself to do the seemingly impossible – such as fly, travel underwater, replace hearts, and invent new elements [PT 127]. (This should remind us that actions impossible from the view point of one level of reality and not necessarily impossible when viewed from a higher perspective.)

Bahá'u'lláh, of course, says the same as 'Abdu'l-Bahá but adds an absolutely essential codicil. He says that

*decrees as related to fate and predestination, are of two kinds. Both are to be obeyed and accepted. The one is irrevocable, the other is, as termed by men, impending. To the former all must unreservedly submit, inasmuch as it is fixed and settled. God, however, is able to alter or repeal it. As the harm that must result from such a change will be greater than if the decree had remained unaltered, all,*

therefore, should willingly acquiesce in what God hath willed  
*and confidently abide by the same.* [GWB 132, emphasis added]

“Impending” fate is what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls “conditional” (and “impending”) fate” which may be avoided if appropriate action is taken but “irrevocable” decrees cannot be changed. Indeed, according to Bahá’u’lláh, they should not be changed and humans must accept them. He appears to be offering comfort for the death of a loved one. Removing death per se — or the death of the loved one — from the natural order would indeed, as He says, create an enormous and unjustifiable upheaval in nature. The reason is clear: changing them would cause harmful disorder in creation. For example, few people if any are happy about the death of a parent but if God uses his power to reverse the “decreed” fate of death, the “harm” on the cosmic order will be greater than any good resulting from reversing the law(s) of nature. Most obviously, countless other beings would be denied the opportunity for existence. The entire inter-connected cosmic order would fall apart and replace order with chaos.

*For all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development, and growth. It is established through numerous proofs and arguments that every single thing has an effect and influence upon every other, either independently or through a causal chain.* [SAQ 205]

Because of this interconnection of all things, humans should not ask that God should exempt them from “alter[ing] or repeal[ing]” His “decrees.” In other words, we must evaluate whether or not the negation of natural law by God’s intervention is justifiable given the other — potentially harmful — results such interventions will cause.

A major critique of the Bahá’í philosophy of free will — which applies to religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism as well — concerns divine sabotage of the exercise of free will. In effect, humans are obligated to make the right ‘choice’ or face negative consequences after death. It is argued that there is no real choice, i.e. coercion when one choice has positive consequences while the other has negative consequences. We are, in effect, coerced

into one choice and so there is only the appearance of freedom. Plainly put, the promise of freedom is fraudulent.

There are at least three problems with this argument. First, there is the assumption that genuine free should require the same outcomes for whatever choices we make. This assumption is odd because nowhere else in life is there such an expectation because it violates the principle of cause and effect. The choice to own a store is not the same as the choice to rob it. Why would we expect different causes to lead to the same effects? Why should the life-choices made by Josef Mengele lead to the same outcome as the choices made by Mother Teresa? The notion of equivalent outcomes implicitly involves injustice to those who have followed the path laid out by the Manifestations.

Second, this critique is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the Abhá Kingdom in which there is no punishment but rather a continued growth on the basis of one's choices in life. Thus, the Bahá'í Writings ensure that all people get the afterlife they have chosen for themselves. After they have died, "*all men shall, after their physical death, estimate the worth of their deeds, and realize all that their hands have wrought*" [GWB 169]. They will judge themselves and make spiritual progress in keeping with their self-estimation of their choices. Those who choose to ignore or deny God and His Manifestations will have an after-life that reflects the choices they have made for themselves. However, all will make progress in the kind of existence they have chosen for themselves. The Manifestations and Prophets exist to educate humanity, that "*this lump of coal may become a diamond*" [SAQ 273]. This means that there is spiritual progress in each case in the afterlife on the basis of one's character. It will not be the same for everyone.

In other words, according to the Writings, there is no punishment in the sense of a wilful infliction of retributive pain but rather spiritual progress from whatever low or high level of character development we have attained by our choices. In short, everyone attains the level which they have worked for, i.e. in effect, desired. Consequently, there is no coercion since those who freely chose to live without awareness of God get their wish. From their perspective, there is nothing deficient or unworthy about their condition, although there may be times of awareness of the absence of the divine

since such an awareness and longing is an innate part of human nature [PT 73]. However, as they ignored these pangs during life, they will ignore them in the future.

The last critique of free will we shall consider here is the argument that humankind's free will is incompatible with God's omnipotence. It is argued that if God has all power, then, ultimately, the creatures can have none — and this includes the power of free will. This argument ignores the fact that while nothing external to God can limit God's power, God Himself can limit the expression of His power. Indeed, He very clearly does so by bestowing free will on mankind while withholding it from all other beings. By making free will an inherent part of universal human nature, God chooses to restrain His own power and allows humans to act for themselves not vis-à-vis our bodies but in ethical choices, in the arts and the sciences, in intellectual and creative pursuits and above all in spiritual affairs.

## Part 8: Applying Free Will in Society

In addition to individuals, free will and freedom are also vitally important for Bahá'í social philosophy. After all, since all people have free will, it is necessary to have basic principles and guidelines to manage free will among millions of individuals. Without such guidelines, life in cities and even small towns will easily become impossible. The first principle of these guidelines is moderation.

The principle of moderation requires that free will, agency and social freedom are not appraised strictly for their own sake but rather in the context of other values and for their contribution to mankind's spiritual and material progress. The Universal House of Justice writes,

In his summary of significant Bahá'í teachings, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'u'lláh "inculcates the principle of 'moderation in all things'; declares that whatsoever, be it 'liberty, civilization and the like', 'passeth beyond the limits of moderation' must 'exercise a pernicious influence upon men'."<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, it asks,

Should liberty be as free as is supposed in contemporary Western thought? *Where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive? What are the limits to the expansion of freedom?* For so fluid and elastic are its qualities of application and expression that the concept of freedom in any given situation is likely to assume a different latitude from one mind to another; these qualities are, alas, susceptible to the employment alike of good and evil. Is it any wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to submission to the will of God?<sup>70</sup>

With these provocative questions, the Universal House of Justice asks us to adopt a reflective, analytical and critical attitude towards the theory and practice of freedom. Too often, these questions and others like them, are not even asked and the result is inadequate analysis, confusion and contradiction.

From a Bahá'í perspective, incomplete and inadequate analysis is a fault of every theory of freedom that does not take account of mankind's spiritual nature as well as the short and long term consequences of any proposed freedom. For example, we observe increasing social pressure to legalize certain mind-altering drugs for recreational use even though their long-term effects are not known. Such 'freedom' "limits our possibilities for progress" and that prohibitions in fact provide more freedom to actualize our spiritual, intellectual and creative potentials. In other words, all freedoms are not necessarily beneficial for individuals and societies and, not all restrictions are necessarily harmful.

Critical analyses of freedom are also necessary because concepts of freedom evolve:

The models [of freedom] of the old world order blur vision of that which must be perceived; for these models were, in many instances, conceived in rebellion and retain the characteristics of the revolutions peculiar to an adolescent, albeit necessary, period in the evolution of human society. The very philosophies which have provided the intellectual content of such revolutions — Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson,

Mill, come readily to mind — were inspired by protest against the oppressive conditions which revolutions were intended to remedy.<sup>71</sup>

In this message, the Universal House of Justice presents the idea that because of former historical circumstances, former philosophies of freedom may no longer be fully appropriate in the new Bahá'í world order. Above all, global inter-connectedness has changed the world and this requires newly re-formulated concepts of freedom, especially in regards to balancing freedom with other societal values. In recognizing the significance of this change in the world situation the Writings take an evolutionary approach to individual free will and societal freedom.

The Bahá'í approach to free will and societal freedom is echoed Isaiah Berlin, one of the foremost political thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He makes it clear that “Liberty is not the only goal of men.”<sup>72</sup> He also recognizes that sometimes “the freedom of some must at times be curtailed to secure the freedom of others.”<sup>73</sup> He adds,

The extent of a man's, or a people's, liberty to choose to live as he or they desire must be weighed against the claims of *other values, of which equality, or justice, or happiness, or security, or public order* are perhaps the most obvious examples.<sup>74</sup>

Like the Bahá'í Writings, Berlin recognizes that freedom cannot be an end-in-itself that consistently overrides all other values but rather must play its role among other necessary values. In this regard, we might think of society as a juggler keeping various values in motion to create the whole ‘performance.’ Maximum freedom for everyone is beyond human capabilities.

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that the Writings advocate what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls “moderate freedom,” saying,

*Similarly, with regard to the peoples who clamour for freedom: the moderate freedom which guarantees the welfare of the world of mankind and maintains and preserves the*

*universal relationships, is found in its fullest power and extension in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.* [SWAB 305, PUP 52]

Nowhere is this teaching of “moderate freedom” – including freedom of speech – more clear than in Bahá'u'lláh's admonitions about the limits of freedom or, as He calls it, “liberty.” His essential message is that individual free will and social liberty have must have limits placed on them; they cannot be allowed to be their own standard and justification of action. He states,

*Consider the pettiness of men's minds. They ask for that which injureth them, and cast away the thing that profiteth them. They are, indeed, of those that are far astray. We find some men desiring liberty, and priding themselves therein. Such men are in the depths of ignorance.* [GWB 335, emphasis added]

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that individual freedom or liberty is not an unalloyed good in itself. Those who think it is an unqualified good under any circumstances are “far astray” i.e. they misunderstand their own nature and what benefits it, and they misunderstand the nature and good of society. In our view, Bahá'u'lláh calls such demands for liberty “pettiness” because it represents short-term thinking with immediate pleasure or convenience blinding us to its long-term destructive effects. For example, since the 1960s drug use has grown from immediate personal pleasure into a massive multi-dimensional societal problem for which there are no easy solutions.<sup>75</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh adds,

*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 . . . Regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection.* [GWB 335]

This teaching about liberty shows two aspects of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom. The first is that an excess of liberty often

allows mankind's lowest animal features to manifest themselves and thereby allows mankind to degrade its noble station in the created world. We become unworthy of ourselves. Such freedom not only threatens individual well-being but also the well-being of society which can easily be undermined by all kinds of conflicting causes demanding ever more 'freedom.' Social life becomes increasingly anarchical and is in danger of becoming – in Hobbes' memorable phrase – a war of all against all. Indeed, just as the Bahá'í Writings teach that the Manifestations are necessary to lift mankind out of its animal condition, so Thomas Hobbes states that

it is manifest that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in the condition of awe; and such a warre as is of every man against every man . . . the nature of War, consisteth not [only] in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all this time there is no assurance to the contrary.<sup>76</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings have a similar view, about too much freedom for mankind's animal nature, about the war of all against all and about war being not only battle but the continuous disposition to being willing for battle. One of the ultimate goals of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation is evolve mankind away from this willingness.

Bahá'u'lláh then goes on to declare that "*Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench*" [GWB 335]. Liberty, by which He seems to mean unrestrained liberty is seditious insofar as absolutely unrestrained speech or conduct undermines legitimately established systems of government, law and social order. He does not approve of sedition because undermining government and social order often unleashes as much misery as it was intended to cure. In part, this is because of mankind's animal nature which seeks to satisfy its desires at the expense of everyone else. Without order, life soon becomes a struggle of all against all and society begins to fragment. This, in turn, weakens the quality of life for every individual.

In contrast to these excesses of liberty, Bahá'u'lláh states that

*True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven*



*of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things. Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven. [GWB 335]*

This passage shows that “true freedom” is not so much based on the possession of individual free will but is also acquired by personal effort to “*awaken spiritual susceptibilities*” [PUP 7] and to recognize the need for submission to God. In other words, free will is a divine gift given along with the rational soul but its full development depends on our struggles to free ourselves from enslavement to our lower animal nature and the resulting individual and collective “*intellectual maladies*” [PUP 205] that distort our thinking and behavior. The capacity for free will and freedom is given, but keeping it alive and pure depends on us. It can be lost.

The second lesson we learn about liberty is that humans need protection from not just from enemies but all too frequently, from “[their] own ignorance” i.e. from themselves. Therefore, they need the guidance of the Manifestations of God. While some, such as most humanists, may regard this as an example of divine paternalism, others will point to history as illustrating the need for such guidance. While ‘paternalism’ has negative connotations for many, we must recognize not all paternalisms are the same. While in most cases paternalistic rule is practiced for the interests and advantages of the rulers, this is not so in the case of God Who has no interests and personal advantages to pursue. In His essence, God lacks nothing, and, therefore has nothing to gain. His rule over mankind is motivated by His love and the communicative nature of His love which desires the creation and well-being of man [HW Arabic #3].

Unlike Thomas Hobbes, the Bahá'í Writings reject tyranny as a way to restore and/or maintain social unity and order they agree that an excess of freedom can lead to social disharmony, fragmentation and disorder in the struggle of all against all. Bahá'u'lláh demonstrates His opposition to dictatorship in His declaration “*It ill*

*beseemeth the station of man to commit tyranny; rather it behoveth him to observe equity and be attired with the raiment of justice under all conditions*" [TB 170]. For both the tyrant and the oppressed, tyranny violates mankind's lofty station as the acme of the created world [SAQ 50:4]. It also suppresses the progressive development of humanity's divinely bestowed capacity for justice, reason, good will, honesty and trustworthiness. This damages and distorts the actualization of human nature in both the rulers and the ruled. This offends against God's law which wants us to actualize our inherent capacities.

'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the rejection of tyranny in his statement that if a person

*direct his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, this too would be most praiseworthy. But should he display these qualities under other conditions, this would be deserving of blame.* [SAQ 57:10 p. 249]

In other words, he approves of opposition to tyranny and, by implication, rejects a passive attitude towards "bloodthirsty tyrants." His word choice displays the strength of his feelings on this point: "anger," "wrath," "ferocious beasts" and "most praiseworthy." However, this statement does not touch on the means of such opposition which must conform to certain guidelines.

Expressions of free will must also be moderated by considerations of mankind's spiritual nature which requires us to act in accordance with equity, good will, rationality, humility and kindness among other virtues. Action or speech that does not harmonize with these or other spiritual virtues should be avoided. When humans forget their essentially spiritual nature and speak and act against it, individuals and societies suffer. For example, there are those like John Stuart Mill, who view free will as unassailable under virtually any circumstances and who would defend the right to choose drug addiction and prostitution as a way of life. He does not approve of them, but, in his lack of spiritual understanding, finds such choices are a legitimate use of free will. Another immoderate use of free will can be seen in destructive and violent public demonstrations that prevent others from going about their lawful business, and go from

protesting which is a right of free speech to disrupting which is not. In regards to excesses of free will in speech, "*Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation*" [TB 143]. In our understanding, this admonition should not be interpreted as support for essentially untruthful, mealy-mouthed and euphemistic speech which hinders and distorts communication and understanding but rather that speech should avoid bombast, *ad hominem*s, and excessive rhetoric.

As we have shown, there are two distinct but logically related aspects of freedom, one focusing on the sources of individual free will which is the foundation of societal freedom and the other focussing on how the teachings on individual free will can be applied in society and correlated with other values and the practical necessities of ensuring the common good. Society is where the issue of freedom gets complicated or 'messy' because other values and necessities besides freedom have to be taken into consideration. Most notable among these is the concept of the 'common good' which limits the scope of individual action.

Perhaps the most basic feature of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is that it sees "man's freedom in his conformity to an order of being incomparably greater than himself."<sup>77</sup> In other words, in thinking about freedom it is necessary to recall that mankind exists in a universe that is both spiritual and physical, is teleological and evolutionary and is a divine creation in which mankind is the highest form of life. We must also remember that mankind itself is a teleological being whose goal is to actualize not only its physical but above all its spiritual potentials during earthly existence in preparation for continued evolution after death. This has numerous implications. First, it means that individual free will and freedom exist to fulfill the goal of actualization of mankind's highest capacities; they have an inherent purpose and are not intended to uncritically enable the pursuit of any goal whatever. Second, this means there exists an objective standard i.e. human nature, by which we can evaluate our actions vis-à-vis self-actualization. Our teleological nature 'expects' us to achieve certain things and if we do not. We cannot help but distort our nature. Third, vis-à-vis personal free will and societal freedom, this means that only looking at the physical consequences of freedom is insufficient to form a complete

and accurate assessment. For example, anti-addiction strategies must not only include the physical but also the psychological and spiritual well-being of the addict. This includes the welfare of his/her soul through the adoption of world-views more aligned with the nature of the soul.

The existence of human nature with specific capacities suggest that a ‘common good’ can be defined for human societies which, after all, are made up of individuals. In other words, on the basis of our understanding of what humans are, what they can be and were intended to be, it is possible to identify – in broad terms – the attributes required for a society and its members to thrive, to “be all [we] can be.” The Bahá’í concept of the common good is based on the Bahá’í philosophy of human nature which is based on two principles. The first is that “*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*” [PT 73, emphasis added]. The second is that the “*rational soul*” [SAQ 241] is what “*distinguishes man from the animal*” [SAQ 241]. Virtually everything we can say about personal free will and societal freedom must be in harmony with the Bahá’í philosophy of human nature. Human nature and, therefore, the common good are universal to i.e. true of all human beings in the past, present and future.<sup>78</sup> These principles provide a set of specific criteria by which to determine what is a valid concept of free will and societal freedom. For example, it can never be for the common good to suppress individual or collective spirituality – as was programmatically done in virtually all Communist countries – because this violates and necessarily distorts human nature and inevitably hurts everyone.

## Part 9: Freedom of Expression

The Bahá’í Writings view freedom as an instrumental value and not as an end-in-itself; nor is it the only value we need to take into consideration. However, it is instrumental as well as essential insofar as individual free will and societal freedom are necessary for human advancement. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes this clear when he asserts that

*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]

Since “development and growth” of mankind are a task assigned to all people by Bahá'u'lláh, the means to that development cannot help but be essential for mankind. Without freedom of thought and speech we would be unable to obey Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that “*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” [GWB 214]. Freedom may be instrumental value but it is, nonetheless, essential insofar as it is necessary to achieve the advancement of both individuals and civilizations.

Further emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression, Shoghi Effendi adds,

Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views. [BA 63-64]

Without consultation and debates, without free exploration of ideas, the independent investigation of truth is obstructed and with it, human progress. The “freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views,” is necessary to make the process of consultation effective as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's statement makes clear:

*The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.* [SWAB 87, emphasis added]

Especially noteworthy in this pronouncement is the recognition that clashes of opinion are a normal and healthy part of the consultation process. Indeed, he makes “the *clash* of differing opinions” a precondition for discovery of the truth. That is inevitable when people present their true, sincerely held opinions on serious issues – although this does not excuse such rudeness as ad hominem attacks,

sarcasm and monopolizing discussions. Furthermore, this declaration implies that holding back one's opinion for the sake of 'peace' is not necessarily a virtue because it deprives the consultation process of a necessary opinion. Equally significant is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá forbids hurt feelings over differences of opinion. In consultation, there are no 'safe spaces' from having one's viewpoints challenged or hearing diverse opinions. We are expected to at least listen to a variety of opinions and are implicitly forbidden to use hurt feelings as leverage to limit the discussion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement of freedom of speech in consultation becomes especially significant when we realize that consultation is not only for LSAs but also for all Bahá'ís, and eventually for the entire world. The clear implication is that freedom of speech is a universal value meant for all nations and cultures.

One of the key features of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom concerns the means by which the teachings about freedom are applied. The manner in which rules are implemented are as essential as the rules themselves.<sup>79</sup> On the issue of freedom, Shoghi Effendi makes clear that the Bahá'í methods are essentially spiritual, that they rely on consultation and are aimed at the growth of insight and understanding:

The unfettered freedom of the individual should be *tempered* with *mutual consultation* and sacrifice, and the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a *deeper realization* of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a *fuller devotion* to the common weal.<sup>80</sup>

Shoghi Effendi adds,

at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views . . . Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and

prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other. [BA 63-64]

The first part of this declaration vigorously re-asserts the fundamental importance of freedom of thought and expression and firmly rejects “dictatorial authority” and “arbitrary power” as counter-balances or moderators of free speech. That goal must be achieved by consultation.

The second part of Shoghi Effendi's guidance points out the need to “reconcile” or balance freedom and “submission,” or restraint for the personal and common good. An important characteristic of the Bahá'í revelation is that such reconciliation is to be achieved by consultation not by *diktat*, and by growth in understanding the mission of the Bahá'í Faith. These methods are completely incompatible with any kind of repressive rule. While these guidelines must be taken into consideration, it is also important to recall the decision of when and how to apply these principles rest with the individual.

The third part of Shoghi Effendi's statement refers to the “undoubted right of the individual to self-expression.” In other words, free expression is a right, i.e. an entitlement that does not have to be earned but is given by virtue of being human. While it is clear that the principle of moderation also applies here, it is equally evident that by making “self-expression” an “*undoubted* right” gives self-expression priority, i.e. this right is the basis to which moderation is applied as a modifier is applied to a subject. In the philosophical language of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “self-expression” is the substance and “moderation” is the accident. Our purpose in pointing this out is to illustrate once again, as we have with consultation, that the Writings are strongly inclined towards individual freedom and that fears for individual rights in the new world order are groundless. This also applies to the review provision which is sometimes misrepresented as an abrogation of free speech. In reality, it is nothing more than an insistence on accuracy of information about the Bahá'í Faith which is to say, nothing that a responsible editor or publisher's fact checker would not do.

The Writings provide various guidelines for deciding when and when not to limit freedom of expression. The principle of

moderation seen in Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawh-i-Ittihad* which points out a specific limitation to free speech:

*For example, consider that if two of the chosen ones of God should come to a town and should speak about the same matter and disagree, this would be the cause of disunity. It would cause them and those around them to be deprived and debarred from the bounties of unity.*<sup>81</sup>

In a teaching situation, giving precedence to unity is a matter of common sense; this is not a situation where it is appropriate to advocate for one's own viewpoints and confuse the seekers about the teachings. However, it is important not to over-generalize this specific example and remember that this example does not forbid having differing opinions or even expressing them — in other situations. In our understanding, there is no warrant for applying what is true of free speech in teaching situations to all other kinds of situations such as debates, the independent investigation of truth and consultation. Doing so would lose the moderation the Writings require. Furthermore, in our understanding, the rights of free speech and the requirements for unity are balanced insofar as individuals are entitled to speak their minds freely — as guaranteed by Shoghi Effendi [BA 63-64] — but not in a manner that disunifies the community, e.g. by persistent harassing, encouraging factions and igniting inter-personal friction. Such behaviors are, in effect, a kind of campaigning within the community and a sort of intellectual politicking which may even distract from the goals of the Faith.

By now it is clear that in the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom, and especially freedom of speech, there is no basis for imposing “dictatorial authority” over its adherents let alone non-Bahá'ís. Since “the keynote of the Cause of God” [BA 63-64] is consultation, any arbitrary silencing of free speech is simply incompatible with the principles of the Bahá'í Faith. That is why the Universal House of Justice says, “*Thus there is a balance of freedom between the institution, whether national or local, and the individuals who sustain its existence.*”<sup>82</sup>

Requiring moderation of speech helps build the capacity for self-critique and the ability to evaluate whether or not our ideas vis-à-vis worthiness of utterance. The Universal House of Justice states,



Bahá'u'lláh's assertions clearly call for an examination of current assumptions. *Should liberty be as free as is supposed in contemporary Western thought? Where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive? What are the limits to the expansion of freedom?* For so fluid and elastic are its qualities of application and expression that the concept of freedom in any given situation is likely to assume a different latitude from one mind to another; these qualities are, alas, susceptible to the employment alike of good and evil. Is it any wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to submission to the will of God?<sup>83</sup>

Without a practiced capacity for self-critique, i.e. investigating the truth for oneself, human thought can easily go awry as we become intellectually lazy – and careless – enough to “believe everything we think.”<sup>84</sup> That is a certain way to mislead ourselves. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh points out that we must be self-aware, i.e. self-critical in regards to occasions on which to speak:

*Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.* [GWB 175]

However, it is important to note that this is a guideline for us to consider and not a blunt instrument for suppressing speech we disagree with. It is the individual who must assess the appropriateness of the content, the time and the audience. It cannot be otherwise since it is individuals who usually find themselves in the situations in which these guidelines must be applied.

## Part 10: Three Types of Freedom

At this point, we shall pause to draw some general conclusions about the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom. Mortimer Adler points out, there are basically three types of freedom.<sup>85</sup> The first is “circumstantial freedom” which is free will without external coercion either by individuals, society, legal or economic factors or accidental

external circumstances such as blizzards or car accidents. The Universal House of Justice points out that

A true reading of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh leaves no doubt as to *the high importance of these freedoms to constructive social processes*. Consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers. Can it not be deduced from this alone that *attainment of freedom is a significant purpose of His Revelation? His denunciations of tyranny and His urgent appeals on behalf of the oppressed provide unmistakable proof*. But does not the freedom foreshadowed by His Revelation imply nobler, ampler manifestations of human achievement? Does it not indicate *an organic relationship between the internal and external realities of man* such as has not yet been attained?<sup>86</sup>

This passage makes clear that external freedom from tyrannical governments or tyrannical economic practices and systems closely connected. It is, for example, impossible to pursue the independent investigation of truth under a tyranny like Stalin's where all aspects of private and public life were under surveillance and liable for harsh punishment. Similarly, it is impossible for a society to make progress if a good education is limited to the wealthy and resistance is punished by economic deprivation. "[C]onstructive social processes," i.e. societies intent on making progress must recognize the "high importance" of providing freedoms that are conducive to external as well as internal or spiritual freedoms for mankind.

However, while external circumstantial freedom is necessary for progress at the social level, we must not forget that individuals have "rational souls" that are not entirely subservient to external circumstances. As already noted, Bahá'u'lláh says that we cannot blame others i.e. external circumstances, for our disbelief in God [GWB 143] and 'Abdu'l-Bahá says we are always free to make a moral decision, meaning, thereby, that moral decisions are always possible [SAQ 287] — though not easy. Humanity's spiritual nature provides some freedom from external circumstances. A contemporary example of such moral independence is the positive behavior of Bahá'ís in Iranian captivity. A historical example are those who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis or even those

who simply kept silent about the presence of a Jew. Thus, while positive external circumstances are necessary for societal freedom, they are not necessary in all cases.

The second type of freedom is “natural freedom,” i.e. freedom “with which all men are innately or inherently endowed.”<sup>87</sup> As previously shown, this kind of freedom is an aspect of the “rational soul” which enables mankind to free itself – at least partially – from domination by the natural world. “Natural freedom” is potential and, therefore, humans must consciously and willfully actualize it by their choices. The belief that “natural freedom” is universal is foundational to at least four Bahá'í teachings: (1) the essential unity of humankind vis-à-vis capacities and potentials; (2) the core ethics or “eternal verities” [PDC 13] passed on by successive Manifestations; (3) progressive revelation and the individual and societal choices it requires; (4) the eventual unification of mankind in a federal 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 75]*

From this it is clear that a significant number of signature beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith are closely associated with the concept of “natural freedom.” It is an aspect of the “rational soul” which is common to all mankind at all times and under all conditions.

The third type of freedom is “acquired freedom”<sup>88</sup> which according to Adler,

depends upon a change or development in human beings whereby they have a state of mind or character or personality which differentiate them from other men . . . these differences represent . . . a superior condition.<sup>89</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings agree that “acquired freedom” comes through our own freely willed efforts and represents a state of being superior to immersion in our animal nature. . The transcendental spiritual freedoms must be earned not by choosing to will as we desire<sup>90</sup> but by choosing to will as we ought<sup>91</sup>, i.e. to choose the challenges of

actualizing our spiritual and intellectual potentials as innately given in our human nature by God. We follow the divine law, not our preferences. This transcendence of nature — especially, our animal nature — opens up new possibilities or freedoms for our evolution as human beings. In acquired freedom we realize our specifically human potentials. In contrast, we have very limited and often no control over “circumstantial freedom,” i.e. the external circumstances that contextualize our use of free will. Moreover, we have no control whatever over “natural freedom” or free will with which all humans are endowed by God. This “natural freedom” is not only a divine gift but is also an obligation to use and use wisely.

“Acquired freedom” has two important implications. The first is the necessity of accepting the fact that while all humans have the capacity to acquire freedoms, not all of them choose to do so. Instead, to their own detriment in this world and the next, and to the detriment of society, some choose to remain captives of the material world and of their animal natures and to reject the challenges of actualizing their full range of potentials. They are self-enslaved. For this reason acquired freedom is beyond the grasp of those who lack morality and good will. To obtain it, they must advance to a higher moral state. However — and this is essential — the tragic refusal to actualize cannot be met with coercion of any kind; true freedom is not just the opportunity to succeed but also the opportunity to fail. This tragedy requires a special spiritual discipline from us, namely, accepting this choice and realizing that nothing in the Writings justifies coercing individuals on these matters. Even in this we must accept their right to do as they will.

## **Part 11: Freedom and Coercion**

Prohibiting coercion even when people are damaging their own well-being is the Bahá’í answer to the long-debated question of whether humans can be forced to be free. Rousseau, for example, maintains that obedience to the “general will” for the common good is what makes us free; consequently, by being coerced to think and act according to the “general will” we can be forced to be free. Communists make the same claim. Freedom means accepting material and historical necessity which is represented by the will of the Communist Party. For this reason when coercion is used it is being

used to help us be free. The secret police are agents of freedom! The Bahá'í Writings reject such “*intellectual maladies*” [PUP 204] as essentially dishonest. On this point, the Writings agree with John Stuart Mill who also rejects coercing people to pursue their own advantage. Paternalistic pressure may compel outward compliance but it cannot create genuine willingness and commitment. Indeed, doing so is nothing less than an attempt to reduce a human into a will-less robot, and, thereby, is an attack on God's given human nature.

Broadly speaking the Bahá'í view opposes paternalistic impositions on free will: the Universal House of Justice states that because “Every human being is ultimately responsible to God . . . conscience is never to be coerced, whether by other individuals or institutions.”<sup>92</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá – and the Universal House of Justice – prefer to lead by pointing out the way and letting personal spiritual understanding and growth actualize the necessary changes. This applies even to large scale issues of needed economic reform:

*The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit . . . The Bahá'ís will bring about this improvement and betterment but not through sedition and appeal to physical force – not through warfare, but welfare. Hearts must be so cemented together, love must become so dominant that the rich shall most willingly extend assistance to the poor and take steps to establish these economic adjustments permanently. If it is accomplished in this way, it will be most praiseworthy because then it will be for the sake of God and in the pathway of His service.* [PUP 238]

Two points stand out here. First, there is no ‘techno-fix’ to mankind's economic problems, no set of rules that we can manipulate to make plans to diminish extreme income inequality or remedy poverty. The reason why is clear (although largely ignored): people, their values, decisions, ambitions, goals and good will are the basis of economics. No fundamental economic improvement can be expected as long as individuals, societies and researchers operate in a purely materialistic framework which leave out the ‘human factors.’ Real economic change requires real change in people. Second, paternalism,

i.e. external compulsion will not create deep psycho-spiritual changes needed for future material and spiritual evolution. Economic changes must come willingly. He re-emphasizes this, saying,

*among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is voluntary sharing of one's property with others among mankind. This voluntary sharing is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it. Nay, rather, man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor, just as is done in Persia among the Bahá'ís. [SWAB 302]*

In other words, diminishing the gap between extreme wealth and poverty will work better by the insight and good will gained from “acquired freedoms” of spiritual development than by paternalistic compulsion. Obviously, if economic reforms come from willing inner commitment, there will be fewer people trying to manipulate laws and systems to their own advantage. Soviet Russia is a telling example. Legally, all people were economically equal but in truth it did not take long for the nobility and wealthy classes to be replaced by countless party member commissars, bureaucrats and managers<sup>93</sup> who accumulated enormous personal wealth. This is why the Writings recommend freely willed conviction over compulsion.

### 11.1: Two Concepts of Liberty

One of the most influential theories in the last seventy years is Isaiah Berlin's “*Two Concepts of Liberty*” (1958). Berlin's wide-ranging essay is famous for clearly identifying and naming “negative freedom”<sup>94</sup> which is freedom from deliberate external interference by individuals and/or governments and “positive freedom” which is the capacity to actualize our free will. The first is *freedom from* and the latter is *freedom for*; the first refers to external coercion and the second to the capacity and opportunity to attain our goals.

As we have just demonstrated, generally, the Bahá'í Writings balance negative and positive liberties. As shown above, the Writings

display strong preferences towards negative liberty, i.e. non-interference in others' lives to the greatest degree feasible. Their condemnation of tyranny; the preference for spiritual growth over compulsion both in this world and the next; especially their rejection of compulsion in religion; the emphasis on balancing unity and diversity; the independent investigation of truth; the equality of men and women; and the prohibition of compulsion in fund raising illustrate this basic preference for abolishing and/or not imposing restrictions and interfering in people's lives.

Positive freedom concerns what we are free *for*. Nigel Warburton points out that just because no one is preventing you from doing something, it does not follow that you

are genuinely free. Positive freedom is a matter of achieving your potential, not just having potential.<sup>95</sup>

For example, we may be free to paint without any external interference but we are not really free to do so if we lack the money to buy paint.<sup>96</sup> Practical freedom requires not just capacity but also genuine opportunity. However, these opportunities do not only come from the outside – they also come from within. As Isaiah Berlin points out, we are not free if we are slaves to our physical nature, to extreme gullibility or outbursts of temper. “The positive conception of freedom as self-mastery with its suggestion of man divided against himself”<sup>97</sup> and a higher self often identified with reason or a higher self<sup>98</sup> leads into dangerous waters. This, according to Berlin, is the latent dictatorial potential in positive freedom, i.e. the temptation to compel others to be free by forcing them to develop their ‘higher’ natures. He approvingly quotes Kant’s statement, “Paternalism is the greatest despotism imaginable.”<sup>99</sup>

Paternalism is despotic not because it is more oppressive than naked, brutal, unenlightened tyranny . . . but because it is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being determined to make my own life.<sup>100</sup>

This is precisely what the Bahá'í Writings seek to avoid because paternalism holds back individual and societal evolution in spiritual

growth and, thereby, our arrival at the unification of mankind. Infantilization does not foster maturity.

Notwithstanding the inclination towards negative freedom, the Writings also recognize that people cannot be free if oppressed by body-and-mind grinding poverty, lack of education or injustice — all of which are required for freedom to be meaningful. For this reason, the Writings prescribe a major re-thinking of mankind's economic principles, such as the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty.

## Part 12: Conclusion

This overview of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom provides the basis for three major conclusions.

First, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is rational, coherent and comprehensive. It is rational because its teachings are developed according to the principles of reasoning, specifically, the law of non-contradiction.<sup>101</sup> It is coherent because the principles and teachings are interdependent and mutually supportive. Every teaching builds on its predecessor and sets the stage for its successor. We might also say that that each subsequent deduction is potentially present in its predecessor. Furthermore, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is also coherent because its teachings are all based on certain metaphysical principles that ensure the underlying unity of its philosophy of freedom. This unity will become more apparent throughout our study.

The Bahá'í Writings cover the broad spectrum of issues about freedom such as the metaphysical basis of free will; the body and free will; consciousness, intentionality and freedom; freedom and responsibility; personal freedoms vis-à-vis community rights; legitimate limitations on personal freedom; positive and negative liberty<sup>102</sup>; circumstantial, natural and acquired freedom<sup>103</sup>. There, of course many other issues to be explored but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, the Bahá'í Writings understand freedom as spiritual, teleological and instrumental in nature. Free will is one of mankind's divinely given spiritual capacities and achieves its highest expression



in advancing our spiritual development. It is also teleological, i.e. it exists for a purpose, namely, the actualization of mankind's physical, intellectual and spiritual potentials. Such progress is, after all, the purpose of all the Manifestations of God. Furthermore, in contrast to many other philosophies of freedom, the Bahá'í Writings teach that while freedom is a necessary instrument for the achievement of greater spiritual ends, it is necessary but not sufficient for human progress. Freedom is not an absolute end in itself and by itself does not lead to progress that is appropriate to human nature. The Manifestations are must provide the needed spiritual guidance.

Finally, the philosophy of freedom includes – and possibly originates – at least two original arguments strengthening the basis of free will by showing the untenability of materialist views of human nature. By showing the untenability of materialist determinism in its various forms, the Bahá'í Writings further undermine the materialist understanding of human nature and problematic conclusions that follow for the value of individuals; the basis and application of ethics; the nature and purpose of social interactions; and the purpose and meaning of human existence including suffering.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's arguments, while somewhat technical, are important because they not only solve two long-standing scientific and philosophical problems but, more important, they further show the untenability of materialist and determinist positions on free will. The first of these provides a new solution to the mind-body problem whereas the second demonstrates the impossibility of mind-brain identity theory there by showing the necessity of invoking non-physical entities to explain certain brain functions. Because of their somewhat technical nature, these are in the appendix to this paper and not in the main text.

## **Appendix: Brain and Mind**

The Bahá'í Writings provide at least two decisive insights to the problem of the relationship between brain and mind. Descartes formulated the classical dualist position by claiming that mind (or non-extended substance) and brain (material, extended substance) are essentially different and, therefore, cannot communicate. Which of these two is the basis of free will?

In our view, the Bahá'í Writings present a simple and elegant solution to the dualism problem: the problem is chimerical, an illusion caused by Descartes' faulty analysis in identifying both the non-extended spirit and the extended body as distinct, separate and wholly incompatible substances. The dualism problem is an artefact of this confused analysis. How can completely distinct, separable and incompatible substances be connected let alone compose a third substance, i.e. an individual human nature?

One of the major arguments against any spiritual understanding of free will is that soul or mind and body cannot interact. This argument is famously formulated by Descartes – although it exists with other philosophers as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out Descartes' error while presenting his argument for 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]*

The solution to the Cartesian dilemma is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's identification of the spirit or soul as the "substance" and the body as "accidental." Being "accidental" makes the body into an attribute of the spirit substance; indeed, it is an "accidental" attribute, i.e. one that is not even essential to the existence of the substance. Thus spirit and body are not necessarily eternally connected and spirit will eventually leave the body behind.

As we recall from foregoing discussion, accidental attributes depend on the substance to exist. When the accidental quality disappears, the substance still remains. Indeed, the substance i.e. the rational soul, is the basis for the mental and spiritual processes. There is no incompatibility between a substance and its attribute. An action is not incompatible with the person who acts; the red color is not incompatible with the tomato itself.<sup>104</sup> In other words, Descartes – and those who use his argument – make the mistake of identifying both rational soul and body as independent substances even though the body is an accidental attribute. This error has misdirected thinking on this subject, and with it the interpretation of research

results. A good example of this is Sam Harris's misinterpretation of the Libet experiments in physical confusing reflex reactions with deliberative thought.<sup>105</sup>

The determinist rejection of free will requires that brain and mind or soul be identic. This is untenable as 'Abdu'l-Bahá shows when he says,

*reflect that the vibration of the air, which is an accident of no importance, attracts and exhilarates the spirit of man and has great effect upon him: it makes him weep or laugh; perhaps it will influence him to such a degree that he will throw himself into danger.* [SAQ 246]

Qualia refer to the subjective qualitative experiences of our own conscious states of mind. These states of mind include each person's unique experiences of sensations such as 'blue' or real and/or imaginative experiences; and events. Qualia refer to the 'what it is like'<sup>106</sup> to be particular individual in a specific situation. In other words, qualia make up the whole of our subjectively experienced 'life-world' which is why they are so incredibly important to humans. Much of human life is driven by the quest for certain qualia or subjective experiences as seen in the pursuit of beauty, friendship, love, poetry, stories, pleasure, music, ritual, humor, justice, truth, God and meaning among other things.

Qualia and subjective experience pose difficulties for brain-mind identity theory because qualia are not physical things – there is no way to 'scoop up' or measure someone's subjective experience. None of the criteria of scientific evidence – physicality, measurability, objective and external observability, and falsifiability among others – can be applied to qualia and subjective experience. How can there be brain functions which cannot be measured? According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, physical measuring devices only provide "*knowledge of things perceptible to the senses*" [SAQ 83] – which excludes qualia and subjective experiences. Consequently, they are not appropriate targets of scientific study. Furthermore, because qualia and subjective experiences are not physical, their actions and interactions cannot be explained in terms of physical cause and effect. The non-physical nature of qualia creates a conundrum for the brain-mind identity theory: how can a physical organ like the brain accommodate

a class of non-physical qualia and subjective experiences? This is self-contradictory. How, for example, can there be aspects of brain function that cannot be measured? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the existence of qualia and subjective experience is incompatible with brain-mind identity theory and, therefore, is incompatible with any form of hard determinism.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> North Korea, China and Russia were engaged for Communism and the United Nations, led by the U.S. fought for a democratic capitalism.
- <sup>2</sup> Portugal gave independence to Angola and Mozambique in 1975. Some would count the American Viet Nam War as a war of national liberation (ended 1975) as well the Soviet war in Afghanistan (ended 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition*, 1979.
- <sup>4</sup> Ian Kluge, ‘‘Postmodernism and the Baha’i Writings’’ in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 9. 2008 [http://bahai-library.com/series/irfan\\_or](http://bahai-library.com/series/irfan_or) at <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com>
- <sup>5</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Volumes I and II first published in 1958.

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- <sup>6</sup> Ian Kluge, "Reason and the Baha'i Writings," *Lights of Irfan*, 14, 2013  
<http://bahai-library.com/series/irfan> or at my philosophy website,  
<https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com>
- <sup>7</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194 – 203.
- <sup>8</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, I. 137–148.
- <sup>9</sup> This is not to be confused with American Transcendentalism as formulated by Emerson among others.
- <sup>10</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays*, p. 118. (Amita Singh)
- <sup>11</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter Two, "What Utilitarianism Is,"  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11224/pg11224.txt>
- <sup>12</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194 – 203.
- <sup>13</sup> Daniel Stoljar, "Physicalism" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/physicalism/>
- <sup>14</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*, p. 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPc9qs7YK1w>
- <sup>16</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*
- <sup>17</sup> Shaun Nichols, "Free Will Versus the Programmed Brain," *Scientific American*, August 2008, [www.scientificamerican.com/article/free-will-vs-programmed-brain/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/free-will-vs-programmed-brain/)
- <sup>18</sup> This is true even in emergence theories. The new phenomena – such as water expanding as it freezes – are unpredictable but that does not mean they are uncaused.
- <sup>19</sup> Richard Taylor, "Freedom and Determinism" in *Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues*, p. 132.
- <sup>20</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, "Miracles." Hume defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature.
- <sup>21</sup> Bunin and Yu, *Blackwell's Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, p. 123.
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123.
- <sup>23</sup> David Hume
- <sup>24</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chp. 3, "Of the Motives of Pure Practical Reason."
- <sup>25</sup> George Musser, "The Quantum Physics of Free Will," in *Scientific American*, February, 2012,  
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/quantum-physics-free-will/>
- <sup>26</sup> E.H. Walker, *The Physics of Consciousness*. He tries to join quantum theory and neuroscience by explaining how quantum effects can affect the

macroscopic world especially the brain. The problem is that these effects are still material and cannot explain the attributes of free will as explained below.

- <sup>27</sup> Ching-Hung Woo, "Free Will is an Illusion, But Freedom Isn't," *Philosophy Now*, Aug-Sept. 2017, Issue 121. [philosophynow.org/issues/112/Free\\_Will\\_Is\\_An\\_Illusion\\_But\\_Freedom\\_Isnt](http://philosophynow.org/issues/112/Free_Will_Is_An_Illusion_But_Freedom_Isnt)
- <sup>28</sup> As a compatibilist, Ching-Hung Woo does not see the denial of free will as a denial of freedom.
- <sup>29</sup> For example, subjective idealism (Berkeley), objective idealism (Hegel), Platonism. Neoplatonism (both of which have many affinities with the Baha'i Writings. See "Neoplatonism and the Baha'i Writings" Parts I (*Lights of Irfan* 11, 2010) and Part II, *Lights of Irfan* 12, 2011 II <http://bahai-library.com/series/Irfan>
- <sup>30</sup> See Bahá'u'lláh, "I Was a Hidden Treasure" (provisional translation) for a discussion of substance and form in the Bahá'í Writings. See also *Some Answered Questions*, 18:2.
- <sup>31</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings," in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 4, 2003.
- <sup>32</sup> Ian Kluge, "Neoplatonism and the Baha'i Writings," Parts I and II in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol 11 2010, Vol. 12 2011
- <sup>33</sup> Bishop Berkeley, "A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge," 1710. Since we only know our internal personal impressions of things, there no evidence for the external existence of matter.
- <sup>34</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, 4, 2003 or at my website <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>
- <sup>35</sup> There are degrees of agency or ability to act – but all things do so [PT 89-90]. The mineral or elements power of action is limited to simple existence [PUP 88].
- <sup>36</sup> Shoghi Effendi, "To an individual believer," Nov, 26, 1939 in LG 536.
- <sup>36</sup> Shoghi Effendi, "To an individual believer," Nov, 26, 1939 in LG 536.
- <sup>37</sup> Shoghi Effendi, "To an individual believer," Nov, 26, 1939 in LG 536.
- <sup>38</sup> Charles Choi, "Brain Tumour Causes Uncontrollable Paedophilia," in *New Scientist*, 21 October, 2002, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn2943-brain-tumour-causes-uncontrollable-paedophilia/>
- <sup>39</sup> Ian Kluge, "Baha'i Ontology," Parts I and II in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 6, 2005 and Vol. 7, 2006.
- <sup>40</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings," in *Lights of Irfan* 4, 2003.
- <sup>41</sup> God has no unactualized potentials because that would mean God is incomplete and subject to change which He is not. However, some

process theologians, most famously Charles Hartshorne, hold the view that God changes.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*.

<sup>43</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to the Hague*, p. 7, emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> This is not, of course, a license to abuse the natural world in which humans are embedded for their earthly tenure since the phenomenal world is also one of God's creations. Humanity's "mastery" is the basis for responsibility for the well-being of the phenomenal world and is not an excuse for predatory environmental attitudes and practices.

<sup>45</sup> *Lebenswelt* refers to the way in which each kind of being – and even every individual of that kind – experiences the world in which they live. A flower does not experience a lion as predator but the lamb does.

<sup>46</sup> Animals do not need to conceptualize classes of things; they only need to recognize certain physical attributes.

<sup>47</sup> Ian Kluge, "Reason and the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, 14, 2013 or at <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>48</sup> The Writings are in foundational disagreement with the extreme subjectivism of Post-modernism See "Post-modernism and the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, 9, 2008 or at [www.bahaiphilosophy.com](http://www.bahaiphilosophy.com)

<sup>49</sup> A philosophical zombie is a model of mankind in which people lack consciousness, a self or ego, and all acts are automatic and dictated by natural laws or a program. There is no individual initiative.

<sup>50</sup> The six conditions of free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend physical cause and effect.

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part 4, Chap. 2, III.

<sup>52</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Baha'i Philosophy of Human Nature" in *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, Spring-Summer 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, p. 295; emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*; Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*. Both are well-known neuro-scientists.

<sup>55</sup> Purpose, or teleology and intention are completely rejected by the scientific concept of matter.

<sup>56</sup> The term "progressive revelation" is used in various places by Shoghi Effendi, e.g. WOB pp. 102, 143; Bahá'u'lláh in GWPB p. 75; Bahá'u'lláh, KI p. 4. The context in each of these examples makes it clear that 'progressive' is meant in the sense of 'advancement' and 'improvement'. This is a vision of history which does not see all stages of human development as equal at all times.

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- <sup>57</sup> Foreign aid programs are a good example of mankind's moral and spiritual progress. A century ago, such policies were inconceivable but now they are part of foreign policy of all advanced nations in which both individuals and national governments make sacrifices to assist strangers in desperate circumstances.
- <sup>58</sup> Ian Kluge, "Baha'i Ethics: A Meta-Ethical Excursion," in *Lights of Irfan*, 15, 2017, [http://bahai-library.com/\\_or](http://bahai-library.com/_or) at [www.bahaiphilosophy.com](http://www.bahaiphilosophy.com)
- <sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Hollingdale), Part 4, "The Honey Offering", p. 252.
- <sup>60</sup> Maurice Cranston, *The Quintessence of Sartreism*, p. 31.
- <sup>61</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 22.
- <sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 6
- <sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Hollingdale), Part 4, "The Honey Offering", p. 252.
- <sup>64</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1993, June 05, *Homosexuality*, p. 2; emphasis added.
- <sup>65</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.
- <sup>66</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*.
- <sup>67</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*.
- <sup>68</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "I Was a Hidden Treasure," (provisional translation) in *Ocean*; emphasis added.
- <sup>69</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4.
- <sup>70</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4; emphasis added.
- <sup>71</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 5.
- <sup>72</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 197.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 198.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 240.
- <sup>75</sup> Even 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to suggest an extreme solution: death.

*In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned. It is, however, mandatory that the use of opium be prevented by any means whatsoever, that perchance the human race may be delivered from this most powerful of plagues. And otherwise, woe and misery to whoso falleth short of his duty to his Lord. [SWAB 148]*



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- <sup>76</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part 1, "Of Man", ch. 13, p. 185-186.
- <sup>77</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 137.
- <sup>78</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Baha'i Philosophy of Human Nature," in *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, Vol. 27, Spring-Summer, 2017.
- <sup>79</sup> Stalin's 1936 constitution was the most liberal on earth – and launched during the Great Terror which killed millions.
- <sup>80</sup> Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 3 June 1925 written to the delegates and visitors at the Convention of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932" pp. 87-88); emphasis added.
- <sup>81</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawh-I-Ittihad*, provisional translation and commentary by Moojan Momen, "Issues Raised," #1.
- <sup>82</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., emphasis added.
- <sup>84</sup> One of my favorite philosophy professors used to say, "Don't believe everything you think!"
- <sup>85</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 107.
- <sup>86</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988, Dec. 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4; emphasis added.
- <sup>87</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 157.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 134.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 135.
- <sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 87.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 143.
- <sup>92</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10, *Issues Related to Study Compilation*.
- <sup>93</sup> Richard Lourie, *Russia Speaks: An Oral History From the Revolution to the Present*.
- <sup>94</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194.
- <sup>95</sup> Nigel Warburton, *Arguments for Freedom*, p. 18.
- <sup>96</sup> Whether or not it is appropriate for government to remedy this situation is a matter of political philosophy.
- <sup>97</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", p. 206.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 206.
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

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- <sup>100</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *A Value Pluralist and Humanist View of Human Nature*, p. 67.
- <sup>101</sup> Ian Kluge, “Reason and the Baha’i Writings,” *Lights of Irfan*, 14, 2013 <http://bahai-library.com/series/Irfan> or at my philosophy website, <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>
- <sup>102</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”, pp. 194 - 203.
- <sup>103</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, I. 137 - 148.
- <sup>104</sup> For a detailed explanation, see “*The Baha’i Philosophy of Human Nature*” in *The Journal of Baha’i Studies*, Vol. 27, Spring-Summer 23017.
- <sup>105</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*, p. 7 - 14.
- <sup>106</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in *The Philosophical Review*. October, 1974.

# The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)

## Revolutionizing the Concepts of Religion, Eschatology and Theology

Sohrab Kourosh

### Abstract

The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude), which was designated by Bahá'u'lláh as the Lord of Books that had been revealed by the Most Exalted Pen and called by 'Abdu'l-Bahá the fountainhead of the water of eternal life,<sup>1</sup> is unique in the history of religions and holy scriptures. This book is not only the key for opening the mysteries of the past Holy Scriptures, but it revolutionizes the concepts of Religion, Eschatology and Theology, by resolving and removing Eschatological barriers and establishing the fundamentals of a Universal Religion and a Universal Theology, that integrates and harmonizes the contending religious ideologies.

Study of The Kitáb-i-Íqán was recommended by Bahá'u'lláh, He said, blessed is the one who had reviewed it and witnessed to its testimony and had studied and pondered its contents<sup>2</sup>, and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who stated "*O thou who art seeking after the knowledge of God! Immerse thyself in the ocean of the explanation of the Beauty of the Merciful, so that thou mayest gather from its depths the pearls of the wisdom of God.*"<sup>3</sup> And by Shoghi Effendi,

who stated “The Íqán is the most important book written on the spiritual significance of the Cause. I do not believe any person can consider himself well versed in the teachings unless he has studied it thoroughly” [LDG1 37].

## The Scriptural Significance of The Kitáb-i-Íqán

Bahá'u'lláh in His last major Writing, the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, states:

*Briefly, there hath been revealed in the Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude) concerning the Presence and Revelation of God that which will suffice the fair-minded.* [ESW 118]

In the Kitáb-i-Íqán, He states:

*All the Scriptures and the mysteries thereof are condensed into this brief account. So much so that were a person to ponder it a while in his heart, he would discover from all that hath been said the mysteries of the Words of God, and would apprehend the meaning of whatever hath been manifested by that ideal King.* [KI 237]

In the introduction to the first English translation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán in 1904, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

*O Thou who are athirst for the water of life this manifest book is the fountainhead of the water of eternal life. Drink so much as thou art able from the fountain of the living water. O thou who art seeking after the knowledge of God! Immerse thyself in the ocean of the explanation of the Beauty of the Merciful, so that thou mayest gather from its depths the pearls of the wisdom of God.* [The Book of Assurance, Front page]

## The place of The Kitáb-i-Íqán in the Bahá'í Literature

Shoghi Effendi in describing the place, the significance, the style and a summary of the themes of The Kitáb-i-Íqán in *God Passes By* states:

Foremost among the priceless treasures cast forth from the billowing ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ranks the Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude), revealed in the space of two days and two nights . . . it was written in fulfillment of the prophecy of the Báb, Who had specifically stated that the Promised One would complete the text of the unfinished Persian Bayán<sup>4</sup>. . . [T]his Book, setting forth the Grand Redemptive scheme of God, 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. . . Revealed on the eve of the declaration of His Mission, it proffered to mankind the 'Choice Sealed Wine whose seal is of musk,'<sup>5</sup> and broke the 'seals' of the 'Book' referred to by Daniel.<sup>6</sup> [GPB 138]

## The Style of The Kitáb-i-Íqán

Bahá'u'lláh's writings are characterized by different forms and styles, each suitable for the content and purpose of its revelation. If a Tablet or treatise was addressed to a particular person or a special cultural group, cultural particularities and language of that person or group were taken in consideration.

In this respect Bahá'u'lláh states:

*At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station.* [ESW 15]

We know that:

- The Kitáb-i-Aqdas is Revealed in the language of the lawgiver,

- The Kitáb-i-Íqán is Revealed in the language of the truth-seeker,
- The Seven Valleys is Revealed in the language of the mystic.

Regarding the style of The Kitáb-i-Íqán, Shoghi Effendi States:

A model of Persian prose, of a style at once original, chaste and vigorous, and remarkably lucid, both cogent in argument and matchless in irresistible eloquence.

## Historical Background of its Revelation

The Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed in Baghdád, the capital of Iraq, which was a part of the Ottoman Empire in late 1861 or early 1862, approximately one year before Bahá'u'lláh's public declaration in the Garden of Ridván. It is assumed that the Kitáb-i-Íqán fulfilled the dual purpose of proving the truth of the Báb's claim and also of preparing the ground for Bahá'u'lláh's own public declaration. The book was revealed in response to questions asked by one of the Báb's uncles when he visited Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdád.

His Holiness the Báb had three maternal uncles. His second uncle, Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí, also known as Khál-i-A'zam (the Greatest Uncle), who was the uncle who raised him after the passing of his father, was the only one of His uncles to have embraced His Cause at the time of His Martyrdom. Aware of the special qualities that the Báb possessed since earliest childhood, Hájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí was the first to embrace the Cause of the Báb in Shiráz after the Letters of the Living and was himself martyred shortly before the Blessed Báb as one of the Seven Martyrs of Tíhrán.<sup>7</sup>

The Báb's eldest uncle, Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad, had great respect for his Nephew's integrity and spirituality. He wrote a letter to the Báb's mother after the Báb visited him upon returning from pilgrimage, and attested to the following:

His eminence Jináb-i-Hájí<sup>8</sup> has safely arrived and I am pleased to spend my time in His presence. . . . Truly, His bountiful soul is the source of felicity for the people of this world, and the next. He brings honor to us all . . .<sup>9</sup>

Yet, despite His admiration for the Báb, Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad did not recognize the station of the Báb for many years. He was heartbroken when his brother was martyred and did not understand the reason why he did not accept the intercession of the influential merchants who were trying so hard to save his life.

Although he was a devoted and practicing Muslim, and their family was known for their piety and charity, after they were identified with the Cause of the Báb and his brother was killed for following and supporting the Báb, the whole family experienced hardship and he and his youngest brother were subject to discriminatory treatment by their business associates and other merchants. For several years he did not want to discuss this subject with anyone. However, once when engaged in a series of discussions with Áqá Mírzá Núru'd-Dín,<sup>10</sup> a close relative of the Báb, Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad was forced to reconsider his position. During the discussion, Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad intimated that he could simply not believe that His own Nephew was the promised one of Islam. In reply, Áqá Mírzá Núru'd-Dín compared Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad to Abú'l-La'hab,<sup>11</sup> the uncle of Muḥammad. Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad was understandably shaken by the comparison and asked Áqá Mírzá Núru'd-Dín what he should do to convince himself of the validity of the Báb's claim. Áqá Mírzá Núru'd-Dín suggested that he go on pilgrimage to Iraq and while there, visit his sister, the mother of the Báb, who had been living there since the martyrdom of her Son, and then go to Baghdád in order to attain the presence of Bahá'u'lláh and ask his questions of Him.

Inspired by this encounter, Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad, who lived in Shíráz, wrote to his youngest brother, Ḥájí Mírzá Ḥasan-'Alí, who lived in Yazd, and asked him to accompany him on pilgrimage. He agreed to join him. It was not until they reached Baghdád that Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad revealed to his brother the real purpose of the visit. The younger brother became angry, and although younger in age, he spoke harshly to him and said he did not want to hear about the Faith and left.

Mírzá Áqá Ján<sup>12</sup> described the events that followed in a Tablet addressed to Shaykh 'Abdu'l-Majíd-i-Shírází.<sup>13</sup> According to the Tablet, Ḥájí Siyyid Javá'd-i-Karbilá'í<sup>14</sup> went to Bahá'u'lláh and informed Him that the Báb's two uncles were in Baghdád. Bahá'u'lláh

instructed him to bring them to His presence. The next day, Hájí Siyyid Javá'd, arrived with Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad.

While in Bahá'u'lláh's presence, the Báb's eldest uncle was overwhelmed by His utterances and in the end beseeched Bahá'u'lláh to help him to see the truth of the Báb's Message, bearing in mind that certain Islamic traditions<sup>15</sup> were not, in his view, fulfilled by his Nephew.<sup>16</sup> Bahá'u'lláh readily consented to help him and bade him to return with a list of the questions which puzzled him. The Báb's uncle then returned with four categories of questions all dealing with the coming of the Qá'im.<sup>17</sup> The questions have been preserved in the papers of the Afnán family.<sup>18</sup>

The questions he asked were the following:<sup>19</sup>

- *The Day of Resurrection.*<sup>20</sup> Is there to be a corporeal resurrection? The world is utterly filled with injustice.<sup>21</sup> How are the just to be requited and the unjust punished?"
- *The Twelfth Imám was born at a certain time and lives on.*<sup>22</sup> There are traditions all supporting this belief. How can this be explained?"
- *Interpretation of the Holy Texts.*<sup>23</sup> This Cause does not seem to conform to the beliefs held throughout the years. One cannot ignore the literal meaning of the Holy Texts and Scriptures. How can this be explained?
- *Certain events, according to the traditions that have come down from the Imáms, must occur before the advent of the Qá'im.*<sup>24</sup> Some of these are mentioned. But none of these has happened. How can this be explained?"

In answer to these questions, Bahá'u'lláh, within the span of two days and two nights, revealed what is known today as the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*<sup>25</sup> but was in the early days referred to as *Risáliy-i-Khál* ("Epistle to the Uncle"). The original copy/manuscript of the Book was written in the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was eighteen years of age at that time. A few corrections and the following paragraph near the end of the book were written by Bahá'u'lláh Himself:

Amidst them all, We stand, life in hand, wholly resigned to His will; That perchance through God's loving kindness and



His grace, this revealed and manifest Letter may lay down His life as a sacrifice in the path of the Primal Point,<sup>26</sup> the most exalted Word. By Him at Whose bidding the Spirit hath spoken, but for this yearning of Our soul, We would not, for one moment have tarried any longer in this city. “Sufficient Witness is God unto Us.” [KI ¶279]

In this book, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the issues and expectations common among the believers of all religions that become obstacles and veils that prevent them from recognizing the promised one of their religion (the new Manifestation of God), whom they await and for whose advent they pray. Bahá'u'lláh does not validate the Shí'ah stories regarding the birth of the Twelfth Imám and the occultation stories about him by discussing the particulars of those tales.

The Kitáb-i-Íqán dispelled every doubt that Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad had harbored. He became a devout believer, and at the end of his life he acknowledged his belief in the twin Manifestations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in his will and testament. The remainder of the Báb's family, as was prophesied by the Báb Himself, including his youngest uncle, Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Ḥasan-‘Alí, eventually embraced the Faith.<sup>27</sup>

The original manuscript of the Kitáb-i-Íqán was presented to Shoghi Effendi in 1948 by Fátimih-Khánúm-i-Afnán, the great-granddaughter of Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad. It was placed in the International Archives Building<sup>28</sup> at Bahá'í World Center on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

## Publication and Translation of The Kitáb-i-Íqán

The Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in Persian (Fársi). It was first published in Persian in Bombay, India in the early 1880s and was again published among a group of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh in 1890.<sup>29</sup> It was first translated into English by ‘Alí-Kuli Khán, Nabilu'd-Dawlih, assisted by Howard MacNutt, and published under the title *The Book of Assurance* in New York by George V. Blackburn, Co., in 1904. It was later retranslated into English by Shoghi Effendi as *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude* and first

published in 1931 by The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States of America.

The following letter, written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Assembly through his secretary, refers to this translation:

As the *Íqán* is the most important book wherein Bahá'u'lláh explains the basic beliefs of the faith, he thought a proper rendering of it would infinitely enhance the teaching work in the West. He hopes that this new rendering will be an improvement on the previous one, but he fully admits that it is far from perfect, far from the original itself. Shoghi Effendi has given the proper transliteration of the Eastern terms and wants you to abide by them, keeping every dash, point, accent or inverted comma. To help you in this, he has also on a separate sheet written these in their proper form. He wishes you further not to include the introduction that exists in the last edition, for he does not think it worthwhile and enlightening. Drop also the glossary that exists at the end of the last edition and form a glossary using the definitions that he has sent to be put in the forthcoming Bahá'í World. As Shoghi Effendi has been emphasizing the need of submitting all publications to the Reviewing Committee, he wants to be the first to abide by that rule, though he hopes that they will not make unnecessary delay. In Germany they have translated the *'Íqán* from the last translation and they are waiting for Shoghi Effendi's rendering to make the necessary alterations and publish their own. The proceeds of the sale of the book Shoghi Effendi wishes to go to the American National Assembly in an unlabeled form. This is a gift of his own personal labors that he wishes to present that body and he wishes it to be considered as a token of appreciation for the help they have rendered him in carrying on his arduous task.

(Signed) RUHI AFNAN.

Unable to find a good typist, I have had to do the work myself, and I trust that the proofreaders will find it easy to go over and will not mind the type errors which I have tried

to correct. I would especially urge you to adhere to the transliteration which I have adopted. The correct title is, I feel, ‘The Kitáb-i-Íqán,’ the sub-title ‘The Book of Certitude.’ May it help the friends to approach a step further, and obtain a clearer idea of the fundamental teachings set forth by Bahá’u’lláh.

(Signed) SHOGHI.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Extracts from the USBN*)

The English translation is divided into two parts:

- Part 1 contains explanations of the symbolic and figurative language of the sacred books and proof of all previous Manifestations
- Part 2 contains proofs of the Báb’s mission and foundation of the Bahá’í theology.

A second edition of “The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude” with an introduction and index was published in 1950. The book has been subsequently printed more than fifteen times.

## The Major Themes of The Kitáb-i-Íqán

Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* listed the major themes of the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

- Proclaims unequivocally the existence of a personal God, unknowable, inaccessible, the source of all Revelation, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent and almighty;
- Asserts the relativity of religious truth and the continuity of Divine Revelation;
- Affirms the unity of the Prophets, the universality of their Message, the identity of their fundamental teachings, the sanctity of their scriptures, and the twofold character of their stations;
- Denounces the blindness and the perversity of the divines and the doctors of religions in every age;

- Cites and elucidates the allegorical passages of the New-Testament, the abstruse verses of the Qur'án, and the cryptic Muḥammadan traditions which have bred those age-long misunderstandings, doubts and animosities that have sundered and kept apart the followers of the world's leading religious systems;”
- Enumerates the essential prerequisites for the attainment by every true seeker of the object of his quest;”
- Demonstrates the validity, sublimity and significance of the Báb's Revelation;
- Acclaims the heroism and detachment of His disciples;”
- Foreshadows, and prophesies the world-wide triumph of the Revelation promised to the people of the Bayán.”

## The Unprecedented Concepts in the Kitáb-i-Íqán

Many of the concepts presented in The Kitáb-i-Íqán are unprecedented in the sacred scriptures of past religions. Some of the concepts that have been mentioned in the religious literature, have been given new definitions and meanings by Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh states:

*Through the movement of Our Pen of glory We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency. [GWB 92]*

The following are some of the unprecedented concepts in The Kitáb-i-Íqán:

- Revelation of the universal religion
- Presentation of the universal Manifestation of God
- Redefining the eschatology and the eschaton.
- Foundation of the Bahá'í theology
- Redefining the concept of Divine Unity

- Revealing and expounding the mysteries of all Scriptures
- Attainment unto the Divine Presence
- The Essential infallibility of the Manifestations of God
- Confirming the ability of the Manifestations of God to perform miracles and allowing people to ask for one.

## Revolutionizing the Concept of Religion

Although the Bahá'í writings indicate that the divine religions are universal, this fact is not explicitly and clearly stated in the Holy Scriptures and understood by the followers of the past religions. Some statements in the past scriptures are indicative of the limited mission of the past Manifestations and the limited scope of their religion:

Some of the statements in the Old Testament indicate that the main mission of Moses was to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt and lead them to the land of milk and honey and establishing the laws was incidental to this process.

[God said to Moses] Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. [Exodus 3:9-10]

Some of Jesus' statements in the Gospels indicate that He considered Himself as the promised Messiah of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles in His Faith was a post Jesus development.

These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. [Matthew 10:5]

He [Jesus] answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. [Matthew 15: 24]

Although there are many verses in the Qur'án that address all humanity, there was an argument in the early Islamic era that Islam had come primarily for Arabs and for Mecca and its surroundings, which was based on verses such as this, God said to Muḥammad:

It is thus moreover that we have revealed to thee an Arabic Koran, that thou mayest warn the mother city [Mecca] and all around it, and that thou mayest warn them of that day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt – when part shall be in Paradise and part in the flame. [*Qur'an* (Rodwell tr.), Sura Counsel, 42:5]

## Revelation of the universal Religion

In The Kitáb-i-Íqán Bahá'u'lláh clearly explained the concepts of universal religion and universality of religion. Revelation of God is for all humanity. There is only one religion, the universal religion of God, eternal in the past and eternal in the future, It integrates and harmonizes all the contending religions of the past as the successive stages of a progressive Revelation.

The purpose of the universal Religion is:

- To establish unity,
- To Spiritualize,
- To educate and
- Transform the individual and society

*In these cities [the Revelation and the holy Books of religions] spiritual sustenance is bountifully provided, and incorruptible delights have been ordained. The food they bestow is the bread of heaven, and the Spirit they impart is God's imperishable blessing. Upon detached souls they bestow the gift of Unity, enrich the destitute, and offer the cup of knowledge unto them who wander in the wilderness of ignorance. [KI ¶219]*

*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. (KI ¶270)*

## Revolutionizing the concept of eschatology

Redefining the Eschaton and the Eschatology: Eschaton is historically defined as: The End of the Time or Age. Eschatology is historically defined as: Doctrines or set of beliefs related to the end of the time, end of the world, Resurrection, Life and death and judgment.

The concept of Eschaton (the end of the time, the age or the world) is presented in all the past religions. However, in the Judeo-Christo-Islamic Eschatological traditions the Eschaton is also connected to the appearance of their promised ones. The signs and prophecies related to the return or coming of the promised one in symbolic and allegorical language were considered as literal events that should precede or accompany his appearance.

The Old Testament contains the signs and prophecies related to the manifestation of their promised Messiah: (1) descent of Elijah in his corporal body from heaven prior to the appearance of Messiah, and (2) the signs and prophecies in the Books of Joel and Malachi, such as:

And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come. [Joel 2:28-32]

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven.  
[Malachi 4:1]

Christian Eschatology is more complicated. In addition to all signs and occurrences mentioned in Jewish Eschatology, there are uncertainties regarding the chronological aspects of the Second Advent and the commencement of the millennium. The eschatological statements in the Gospels predicated four types of Eschatology

(realized, near, far and indefinite) and two types of millennialism (pre and post).

In the Islamic eschatology, although similar to the Judeo-Christian eschatology, the imagery is more expanded and the sequence of events is related with more detail. According to Islamic traditions, at the time of the end, the heavens will be cleft asunder, the sun shall be folded up, the stars shall fall, and the mountains shall be set in motion.

After the appearance of Mahdi (promised one of Islam) and Jesus, Isráfíl, one of the four exalted archangels, sounds the trumpet on the Day of Judgment. In so doing he resurrects the dead to be judged. All will pass a bridge called Şerát that spans the expanse of Hell and connects the plane of judgment to the Heavens (Paradise). The virtuous will pass over the bridge and enter the Paradise, while the sinners fall into the Hell.

In The Kitáb-i-Íqán Bahá'u'lláh explains the mysteries of the eschatological statements of the sacred scriptures of the past religions:

- When is the Eschaton, the end of the time.
- What is the heaven that is cleft asunder.
- What are the Sun and the Moon that will not give light.
- What are the stars that will fall from heaven

In The Kitáb-i-Íqán Bahá'u'lláh explains:

- What is the resurrection and the sound of trumpet.
- Who are the dead that will come to life.
- What is the Rapture
- What is the Judgment and the Şerát.
- What is the Heaven and what is the Hell.

## **Revolutionizing the concept of Theology**

In The Kitáb-i-Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh:



- Establishes the foundation of the Universal (Bahá'í) Theology
- Presented the concept of the Universal Manifestation of God
- Redefined the Concepts of Divine Unity and
- Attainment unto the Divine Presence
- Presented the absolute transcendence of God, inaccessible to and exalted above the comprehension of all created things, even the Manifestations of God.
- Demonstrated that Recognition of the Manifestation of God is the ultimate goal of knowledge and spiritual quest, and that,
- The Manifestation of God is the Godhead in the human world and the world of creation.
- The Manifestation of God must be recognized by His own self.
- The unity of the essence of all Manifestations of God, which are the appearances of the Primal Will in the world at different times and under different names.
- The relativity of the stations of firstness and lastness of all Manifestations of God.

### **Other unprecedented concepts in The Kitáb-i-Íqán**

- The continuity and progressive process of Divine revelation and the relativity of the religious truth.
- Revealing and expounding the mysteries of all Scriptures.
- Essential Infallibility of the Manifestations of God
- The ability of the Manifestations of God to perform miracles and allowing only one.
- The proper method and attitude of a seeker in the spiritual quest for truth.

- Bahá'u'lláh's allusions to His own divine station.

It seems that the essential objective of The Kitáb-i-Íqán is to provide guidance and initiate the process of cleansing, purifying, and preparing the soul of man to be able to receive and recognize the Word of God and enter to the presence of the Universal Manifestation of God in the City of His Revelation (The Universal Religion of God), thus achieving the object of the Bahá'í Revelation, i.e. to effect a fundamental transformation in the individual and social character of mankind.

## Study of The Kitáb-i-Íqán

Study of The Kitáb-i-Íqán was recommended by Bahá'u'lláh, He said, blessed is the one who had reviewed it and witnessed to its testimony and had studied and pondered its contents, and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who stated "*O thou who art seeking after the knowledge of God! Immerse thyself in the ocean of the explanation of the Beauty of the Merciful, so that thou mayest gather from its depths the pearls of the wisdom of God.*"<sup>30</sup>

The study of the Kitáb-i-Íqán can take place on several levels. On one level a person can read the Book and benefit greatly without referring to any other books or materials. However, regarding the Kitáb-i-Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh in the same Book states:

*All the Scriptures and the mysteries thereof are condensed into this brief account. So much so that were a person to ponder it a while in his heart, he would discover from all that hath been said the mysteries of the Words of God, and would apprehend the meaning of whatever hath been manifested by that ideal King.* [KÍ ¶266]

*This servant will now share with thee a dewdrop out of the fathomless ocean of the truths treasured in these holy words, that haply discerning hearts may comprehend all the allusions and the implications of the utterances of the Manifestations of Holiness, so that the overpowering majesty of the Word of God may not prevent them from attaining unto the ocean of His names and attributes, nor deprive them of recognizing*

*the Lamp of God which is the seat of the revelation of His glorified Essence.* [K1 ¶27]

Considering the fact that in the course of exposition and interpretation of the theological and religious concepts, Bahá'u'lláh employs many theological, philosophical, and religious terms, and makes reference to other sacred scriptures as well as historical events, and in light of Shoghi Effendi's statements regarding the importance of The Kitáb-i-Íqán, "The Íqán is the most important book written on the spiritual significance of the Cause. I do not believe any person can consider himself well versed in the teachings unless he has studied it thoroughly,"<sup>31</sup> and "The book is so important that the most minute detail is worthy of consideration,"<sup>32</sup> study of the Kitáb-i-Íqán at deeper levels becomes imperative.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of Bahá'u'lláh's statement in Persian, in "Má'idih-yi-Asmani," Vol. 7, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase of Bahá'u'lláh's statement in Persian, in "Má'idih-yi-Asmani," Vol. 7, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement on the face page of the first English translation of The Kitáb-i-Íqán in 1904, under the title: "The Book of Assurance."

<sup>4</sup> The mother Book of the Báb's dispensation was called the Bayán. There are two Bayáns: one in Persian and the other in Arabic. The Persian Bayán was to have nineteen váhids (parts or units), each having nineteen chapters. However, it was only completed to the tenth chapter of the ninth váhid by the Báb. Regarding this Book Shoghi Effendi states:

Within the walls of that same fortress [Máh-Kú] the Bayán (Exposition) – that monumental repository of the laws and precepts of the new Dispensation and the treasury enshrining most of the Báb's references and tributes to, as well as His warning regarding, "Him Whom God will make manifest" – was revealed. Peerless among the doctrinal works of the Founder of the Bábí Dispensation; consisting of nine váhids (Unities) of nineteen chapters each, except the last váhid comprising only ten chapters; not to be confounded with the smaller and less weighty Arabic Bayán, revealed during the same period. [GPB 24]

The Báb prophesized that the Bayán would be completed by the Promised One. The Kitáb-i-Íqán serves as fulfillment of this prophecy and is considered to be the completion of the váhids of the Persian Bayán:

It was written in fulfillment of the prophecy of the Báb, Who had specifically stated that the Promised One [The one whom God will make manifest] would complete the text of the unfinished Persian Bayán. . . [GPB 138]

- <sup>5</sup> This is a reference to Qur'án's description of the Day of Judgment in which the righteous will be given the Choice Sealed Wine whose seal is of musk.

Verily, the righteous shall be in pleasure; upon couches shall they gaze; thou mayest recognise in their faces the brightness of pleasure; they shall be given to drink wine that is sealed, whose seal is musk; for that then let the aspirants aspire! (The Qur'án (E.H. Palmer tr), Sura 83 – Those Who Give Short Weight)

Surely, among delights shall the righteous dwell! Seated on bridal couches they will gaze around; Thou shalt mark in their faces the brightness of delight; Choice sealed wine shall be given them to quaff. (Qur'án, Rodwell tr. 83:29)

- <sup>6</sup> Daniel was one of the leaders of the Jewish group in the Babylonian diaspora. Although he is not considered a Prophet such as Isaiah or Elijah by Jewish priesthood, his book is a part of the Old Testament. The book of Daniel contains many prophecies regarding the advents of the future Manifestations of God. Most of the prophecies in Chapters 8 and 12 of his book were subject of extensive analysis by the Biblical scholars. Some of the prophecies were considered to have been fulfilled at the instance of the First Advent (Manifestation of Jesus Christ). Other prophecies of the book of Daniel formed the basis for the William Miller's predictions regarding the time of the Second Advent (return of the Jesus Christ) and as stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (in SAQ) those prophecies were fulfilled by Manifestations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. The sealing of the Books is referring to the statements in Chapter 12 (the last chapter of Daniel's prophetic dream of the future):

12:4 But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end.

12:8 And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, 'Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end'. (King James Bible, Book of Daniel)

Some Bahá'í scholars assert, as stated by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By*, that the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán serves as fulfillment of this

prophecy. As the followers of the past religions did not understand the symbolic and figurative language of their sacred books, these books were sealed and closed to them, by explaining the meanings of the symbolic and figurative language and revealing the secrets and mysteries enshrined in these books in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, which was revealed at the dawn of His revelation (time of the end), Bahá'u'lláh removed the seals from the books and opened the meaning of their words.

<sup>7</sup> Hájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí, surnamed Khál-i-A'zam (Literally, "The Greatest Uncle"), the Báb's maternal uncle, and one of the leading merchants of Shiráz. It was this same uncle into whose custody the Báb, after the death of His father, was entrusted, and who, on his Nephew's return from His pilgrimage to Hijáz and His arrest by Husayn Khán, assumed undivided responsibility for Him by pledging his word in writing. It was he who surrounded Him, while under his care, with unfailing solicitude, who served Him with such devotion, and who acted as intermediary between Him and the hosts of His followers who flocked to Shiráz to see Him. His only child, a Siyyid Javád, died in infancy. Towards the middle of the year 1265 A.H. (1848-9 A.D.), this same Hájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí left Shiráz and visited the Báb in the castle of Chihríq. From thence he went to Tihrán and, though having no special occupation, remained in that city until the outbreak of the sedition which brought about eventually his martyrdom.

Though his friends appealed to him to escape the turmoil that was fast approaching, he refused to heed their counsel and faced, until his last hour, with complete resignation, the persecution to which he was subjected. A considerable number among the more affluent merchants of his acquaintance offered to pay his ransom, an offer which he rejected. Finally he was brought before the Amír-Nizám. "The Chief Magistrate of this realm," the Grand Vazír informed him, "is loth to inflict the slightest injury upon the Prophet's descendants. Eminent merchants of Shiráz and Tihrán are willing, nay eager, to pay your ransom. The Maliku't-Tujjār has even interceded in your behalf. A word of recantation from you is sufficient to set you free and ensure your return, with honours, to your native city. I pledge my word that, should you be willing to acquiesce, the remaining days of your life will be spent with honour and dignity under the sheltering shadow of your sovereign." "Your Excellency," boldly replied Hájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí, "if others before me, who quaffed joyously the cup of martyrdom, have chosen to reject an appeal such as the one you now make to me, know of a certainty that I am no less eager to decline such a request. My repudiation of the truths enshrined in this Revelation would be tantamount to a rejection of all the Revelations that have preceded it. To refuse to acknowledge the Mission of the Siyyid-i-Báb would be to apostatise from the Faith of my forefathers and to deny the Divine character of the Message which Muḥammad, Jesus, Moses, and

all the Prophets of the past have revealed. God knows that whatever I have heard and read concerning the sayings and doings of those Messengers, I have been privileged to witness the same from this Youth, this beloved Kinsman of mine, from His earliest boyhood to this, the thirtieth year of His life. Everything in Him reminds me of His illustrious Ancestor and of the imáms of His Faith whose lives our recorded traditions have portrayed. I only request of you that you allow me to be the first to lay down my life in the path of my beloved Kinsman.”

The Amír was stupefied by such an answer. In a frenzy of despair, and without uttering a word, he motioned that he be taken out and beheaded. As the victim was being conducted to his death, he was heard, several times, to repeat these words of Ḥáfiz: “Great is my gratitude to Thee, O my God, for having granted so bountifully all I have asked of Thee.”

“Hear me, O people,” he cried to the multitude that pressed around him; “I have offered myself up as a willing sacrifice in the path of the Cause of God. The entire province of Fárs, as well as ‘Iráq, beyond the confines of Persia, will readily testify to my uprightness of conduct, to my sincere piety and noble lineage. For over a thousand years, you have prayed and prayed again that the promised Qá’im be made manifest. At the mention of His name, how often have you cried, from the depths of your hearts: ‘Hasten, O God, His coming; remove every barrier that stands in the way of His appearance!’ And now that He is come, you have driven Him to a hopeless exile in a remote and sequestered corner of Ádhirbáyján and have risen to exterminate His companions. Were I to invoke the malediction of God upon you, I am certain that His avenging wrath would grievously afflict you. Such is not, however, my prayer. With my last breath, I pray that the Almighty may wipe away the stain of your guilt and enable you to awaken from the sleep of heedlessness.”\*

\*“He took off his turban, and, raising his face towards heaven, exclaimed, ‘O God, Thou art witness of how they are slaying the son of Thy most honourable Prophet without fault on his part.’ Then he turned to the executioner and recited this verse: ‘How long shall grief of separation from Him slay me? Cut off my head that Love may bestow on me a head.’” (*Mathnaví*, Book 6, p. 649, 1, 2; ed. ‘Alá’u’d-Dawlih.) (TN Note B, p. 174.)

These words stirred his executioner to his very depths. Pretending that the sword he had been holding in readiness in his hands required to be resharpened, he hastily went away, determined never to return again.

“When I was appointed to this service,” he was heard to complain, weeping bitterly the while, “they undertook to deliver into my hands only those who had been convicted of murder and highway robbery. I am now ordered by them to shed the blood of one no less holy than the Imám Músáy-i-Kázim himself!” (The Seventh Imám). Shortly after, he departed

for Khurásán and there sought to earn his livelihood as a porter and crier. To the believers of that province, he recounted the tale of that tragedy, and expressed his repentance of the act which he had been compelled to perpetrate. Every time he recalled that incident, every time the name of Hájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí was mentioned to him, tears which he could not repress flowed from his eyes, tears that were a witness to the affection which that holy man had instilled into his heart." [DB ch. 21, p. 446]

- <sup>8</sup> Hájí is the title of a person who has completed the rite of pilgrimage to Mecca (called Háj). This pilgrimage is enjoined on all Muslims who are able to undertake it. Jináb is a courtesy title (His Honor).
- <sup>9</sup> Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. I, p. 153.
- <sup>10</sup> Áqá Mírzá Áqá-i-Afnán (Núru'd-Dín), "His mother was a sister of Khadíjih Bigum, the wife of the Báb, Áqá Mírzá Áqá was born two years before the Báb's Declaration. In a Tablet to His wife revealed in the prison of Máh-Kú, the Báb assures her that when Áqá Mírzá Áqá reaches the age of maturity, he will be her helper and protector. These prophetic words of the Báb were fulfilled, for Áqá Mírzá Áqá dedicated his life to the service of his beloved aunt whom he revered and served with unbounded devotion. Khadíjih Bigum lovingly taught him the Faith and at the age of thirteen Áqá Mírzá Áqá recognized the truth of the Mission of the Báb. . . . From the early days Áqá Mírzá Áqá became the recipient of many favours and bounties from Bahá'u'lláh. . . . Soon after His Declaration near Baghdád, Bahá'u'lláh sent Nabíl-i-A'zam to Persia to announce the momentous news to the Bábís. Nabíl went to the home of Áqá Mírzá Áqá and announced the joyful tidings to the believers in Shíráz. Áqá Mírzá Áqá immediately gave his allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh and considered himself a humble servant at His threshold. (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. 4, p. 328)
- <sup>11</sup> Abú-La'hab, (the name means the "father of flame") was one of the uncles of Muḥammad who refused to acknowledge the prophethood of Muḥammad and was one of his staunchest opponents. The Súrah of Al-La'hab, the Súrah (Chapter) 111 of the Qur'án is in reference to him.
- <sup>12</sup> Mírzá Áqá Ján, the amanuensis of Bahá'u'lláh for forty years. [GPB 115]
- <sup>13</sup> Shaykh 'Abdu'l-Majíd-i-Shírází was one of the early believers (see *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. I, p. 154).
- <sup>14</sup> Hájí Siyyid Javád-i-Karbilá'í was one of the prominent believers at the time of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad (see *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* vol. 1 p. 155).
- <sup>15</sup> Islamic Traditions: The religion of Islam is supported by two pillars, one is the Qur'án and the other is Sunnah, the words and deeds (living example) of the Prophet Muḥammad, which were heard or observed by His close followers and were recorded for posterity. Customarily, the word

Tradition (Ḥadīth) is used in reference to the words or sayings of the Prophet (the verbal part of Sunnah). The followers of the Shí'ah sect of Islam hold that the words and deeds of the Imáms (the descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad through His daughter Fátimih) form a corpus that is complementary to the Prophetic Sunnah and Traditions. There are a number of Traditions attributed to some of the Imáms that contain prophecies regarding the person and appearance of the Qá'im which were interpreted literarily by the Shí'ah clergy.

- <sup>16</sup> The followers of many religions are expecting some special events to take place that signify the time of the end, coinciding with the coming or return of their promised one. The most common events and signs are:

First: The rolling up of the heavens.

Second: The sun will be darkened.

Third: The moon shall not give her light.

Fourth: The stars shall fall from heaven.

Fifth: The dead shall arise from their tombs.

Sixth: Ferocious animals will make peace with grazing animals.

Seventh: They will share the same pasture and food.

(from *The Brilliant Proof*, pp. 31–32)

- <sup>17</sup> Qá'im (one of the stations claimed by the Báb), the word means "He who ariseth" or "the one that is standing." It is the title of the promised one of Islam whose advent coincides with the Day of Resurrection. Bahá'u'lláh states "When the Qá'im ariseth, that day is the Day of resurrection." [KI ¶152]

- <sup>18</sup> Afnán (Literally means "twigs") are the family of the Báb (cousins, uncles etc.) who became believers. They chose Afnán as their family name (an allusion to the Báb being the main trunk of the tree, and they being the twigs).

- <sup>19</sup> Quoted from H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh, The King of Glory*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1980. pp. 164–65.

- <sup>20</sup> The Islamic concept of the Day of Resurrection is very similar to this concept in Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. In general they believe that the advent of the promised one of Islam, the Mahdí (literally meaning the Guided One for Sunnis) or Qá'im (literally meaning the Standing One or the Rising One for the Shí'ahs) is coincidental with the Day of Resurrection. In that day all the dead will rise from their graves in their physical bodies and will be present in the plane of resurrection. They will all be judged by the weight of their good deeds. All have to pass over a bridge (called Šerat) that spans Hell and connects the plane of judgment to Heaven (Paradise). This bridge is narrower than a hair, sharper than a



blade, and longer than any conceivable measure. The people of the right (those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds), will have no trouble passing over the bridge. The more righteous a person the faster he/she passes over the bridge. Those whose bad deeds are heavier will fall from the bridge into Hell. The majority of Muslims believe in corporeal resurrection and physical Heaven and Hell.

- <sup>21</sup> The Muslims believe that their promised one (Mahdí or Qá'im) will come with worldly power and authority, will establish justice and punish the unjust (Justice and equity will fill the world, in the same manner that injustice and inequity has filled it up). They believe that he will establish the ascendancy of Islam and Muslims over all other religions and people and will kill the nonbelievers (in Shí'ah belief, even the non-Shí'ah Muslims).
- <sup>22</sup> The followers of the Shí'ah sect of Islam believe that an authentic and reliable Tradition from the Prophet Muḥammad states: "I leave two things of value amidst you in trust which if you hold on to, you will never go astray: the Qur'án and the members of my household. These will never be separated until the Day of Judgment." They believe that the "members of my household" means Imám 'Alí Ibn-i-Abí Táleb (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet) and 'Alí's male descendants (those who were accepted by the Shí'ahs as Imáms, the inspired religious leaders, (their number differs, i.e., four or six or eleven according to different sects)). The main sect of Shí'ah Islam (who accept twelve Imáms, 'Alí and eleven of his descendants) accept the authority of those whom they call the "Fourteen Sinless or Inerrant," – the Prophet Muḥammad, Imám 'Alí, his wife Fátimih, the daughter of the Prophet, and their accepted male descendants or Imáms. The "Twelfth Imám" is believed to be the promised one of Islam, also called Qá'im (the one that is standing) and Mahdí (the guided one). The Shí'ah believe that he is the son of the Eleventh Imám, Ḥasan al-'Askarí, who was known not to have a son. There are several stories about the identity of his mother and his miraculous birth. Some stories hold that his mother was a slave girl named Rayḥáneh or Şaql or a Byzantine slave-girl who was bought by the Tenth Imám, 'Alí al-Hadí, for his son the Eleventh Imám, Ḥasan al-'Askarí. In some versions of story, the girl was a princess, the daughter of a Byzantine Emperor, who was informed in a vision that she would be the mother of the Mahdí. The Twelfth Imám is believed to have been born in 255 AH/868 AD (or in some stories five years later, close to the date of the death of the Eleventh Imám on 260 AH/ 873 AD) in Sámarrá, in Iraq. He was given the same name as the Prophet, Abu'l-Qásim Muḥammad. The miraculous and extraordinary story of his birth originated from an unknown woman who was a relative of the Eleventh Imám. She said that she visited the Eleventh Imám's house one day and did not see any signs of pregnancy in the Imám's wife, but

when she was leaving in the afternoon, the Imám asked her to stay because his wife was going to give birth to his son. That night the Imám's wife gave birth to a boy, who at the moment of birth prostrated and prayed by reciting a few Qur'anic verses. This lady related that when she went back to the Imám's house for another visit a few weeks later, she saw a five- or six-year-old boy playing in the yard. She asked the boy who he was and the boy told her that he was the child that was born few weeks ago and when she expressed surprise, the boy said that we (Imáms) grow at an extraordinary rate. (For more details see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, pp. 160-61)

"The usual miraculous accounts of his talking from the womb, etc . . . may be passed over to the only occasion on which he is said to have made a public appearance. This was in 260/874 when the Eleventh Imam died, it appears that none of the Shi'ih notables knew of the birth of Muḥammad [the "Twelfth Imam"] and so they went to the Eleventh Imam's brother, Ja'far, assuming that he was now the Imam, Ja'far seemed prepared to take on this mantel and entered the house of the deceased Imam in order to lead the funeral prayers. At this juncture a young boy came forward and said: 'Uncle, stand back! For it is more fitting for me to lead the prayers for my father than for you.' After the funeral, Ja'far was asked about the boy and said that he did not know who the boy was. For this reason, Ja'far has been vilified by generations of Shi'is as *Kadhdháb*, the liar. The boy was seen no more and Shi'is tradition states that from that year he went into occultation. At Sámarrá, beside the gold-domed Shrine of the Imáms 'Alí al-Hádí and Ḥasan al-'Askarí is a mosque under which there is a cave. The end of one of the rooms of the cave is partitioned off by a gate which is called Báb al-Ghayba (Gate of the Occultation) and was built on the instructions of the Caliph an-Náṣir in 606/1209. The area behind the gate is called Ḥujrat al-Ghayba (Chamber of the Occultation) and in the corner of this is a well, the Bi'r al-Ghayba (Well of the Occultation) down which the Imam Mahdí is said to have disappeared. Shi'is gather in the rooms of the cave and pray for his return." (Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, p. 161)

Shí'ahs believe that the Twelfth Imám, who was born in 255 AH/868 AD, is still alive and continues to be in occultation. He is believed to be residing in two invisible cities called Jábulsá and Jábulqáá, and will appear at the end of the time prior to the day of resurrection, in which time he will kill all the nonbelievers and establish the rule of Shí'ah Islam over the world. In the mind of a Shí'ah, the Báb Who was born in Shiráz in 1819 could not be the Qá'im who was born almost one thousand years earlier and was to come out of occultation.

- <sup>23</sup> There are many references in the *Shí'ah* holy traditions regarding signs and events that appear before or at the time of the advent of the Qá'im. Among them are the rising of the sun from the west and the appearance of a star the size of the moon from the east. Several of the enemies of the *Shí'ahs* who died many centuries ago will return to fight against him, among them is Dajjál (the one-eyed disciple of Satan), and many other signs and event. The Qá'im will kill so many of his enemies with his sword that their blood will flow like a river that reaches the knees of his horse. He is expected to promote Islam and establish the rule of the Qur'án. Contrary to these expectations, the Báb established a new religion and revealed a new Holy Book.
- <sup>24</sup> The *Shí'ahs* believed that the "Twelfth Imám, did not die but has been concealed by God from the eyes of men. His life has been miraculously prolonged until the day when he will manifest himself again by God's permission. . . . he is still in control of the affairs of men and is the Lord of The Age (*Sáhibaz-Zamán*). . . . The Hidden Imám was popularly believed to be resident in the far-off cities of Jábulsá and Jábulqá and in former times books were written about persons who had succeeded in traveling to these places. Less has been made of this particular tradition in recent times when modern geographical knowledge permeated the *Shí'ah* masses and it became generally realized that no such places existed."

The Hidden Imam, the Imam Mahdí, is in occultation awaiting the time that God has decreed for his return. This return is envisaged as occurring shortly before the final Day of Judgment. The Hidden Imam will then return as the Mahdí with a company of his chosen ones and there will also return his enemies led by one-eyed Dajjál and the Sufyání. The Imam Mahdí will lead the forces of righteousness against the forces of evil in one final apocalyptic battle in which the enemies of the Imam will be defeated. (Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, pp. 165-66)

- <sup>25</sup> Some scholars think that for a book of this size (almost 200 pages in Persian) to be revealed and transcribed within the span of two days and two nights, the same procedure used in the later instances of revelation, in which Bahá'u'lláh chanted or spoke the revealed words and His amanuensis copied the revelation in the form of the "revelation writings" (*khaṭṭ-i-tanzíl* خط تنزیل), might have been adopted. The text was subsequently transcribed from the revelation writings. For additional information see (Symbol & Secret, Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 8) and for a sample of the "revelation writings" see (Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. 1, p. 110.)
- <sup>26</sup> The "Primal Point", from which have been generated all created things, is one of the titles of the Báb. He is also called His Holiness the Exalted One.

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- <sup>27</sup> The above description of the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán is partially based on the historical accounts presented by Adib Taherzadeh in *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. I, pp. 152-163.
- <sup>28</sup> An account of this presentation can be found in *Shoghi Effendi: Recollections* by Ugo Giachery on p. 149.
- <sup>29</sup> H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory*, p. 165, and Shoghi Effendi, letter dated February 9, 1930, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 424.
- <sup>30</sup> See above Footnotes 1, 2 and 3.
- <sup>31</sup> See Footnote No. 3 above.
- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in the book *George Townshend*, p. 73.

# Power and the Bahá'í community

Moojan Momen

Bahá'ís frequently claim that the Bahá'í teachings have the ability to create a new social order, a new way of organising human society such that individuals could develop themselves physically, mentally and spiritually to the utmost of their capability. When trying to explain what this new social order is, they present the list of social teachings that was enunciated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his journeys to the West a hundred years ago: the oneness of humanity, the equality of women and men, the need for harmony and balance between religion and science, the importance of education and so on. While these social teachings may have sounded new and exciting a century ago, that is no longer the case today. Even in the middle of the last century, in 1949, Shoghi Effendi was making this point:

The world has — at least the thinking world — caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound “new” to them.<sup>1</sup>

Many other groups are now promoting these social teachings that 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about a century ago. The majority of thinking people accept them. The problem for humanity now is not accepting these teachings, but how to implement them. Most people have accepted the need for the eradication of poverty, for the equality of women and men, for the removal of racial and other prejudices, and so on, but despite the fact that this has been well accepted for many decades, there has been little success in implementing these aims: the gap between the rich and poor is not closing, women are still unable

to progress in society as easily as men, racism still exists in all areas of social life.

So the problem the world faces is not in the principles that would lead to a better society but in the application. In its 1985 statement, *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice offered up the Bahá'í community as a model for the world to examine:

The experience of the Bahá'í community may be seen as an example of this enlarging unity. It is a community of some three to four million people drawn from many nations, cultures, classes and creeds, engaged in a wide range of activities serving the spiritual, social and economic needs of the peoples of many lands. It is a single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. If the Bahá'í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study.

In this passage, the Universal House of Justice is holding up the Bahá'í community as a model of a new society for study. So the question arises: in what way is the functioning of the Bahá'í community as a solution to the problems that society now faces? What aspects of Bahá'í community life are answers to these problems? What we need to do is to look at our present society and try to determine what are the root causes of the problems that it faces and then to see in what practical ways the functioning of the Bahá'í community tackles these problems. I am going to deal mainly with Western societies since these are the only ones about which I feel I can speak, but what I say may well be also true of other societies since the conditions I will be describing are by no means confined to the West and, in any case, the problems the West faces are gradually seeping out to other parts of the world.

There are of course many problems that the world is facing but I am going to focus on two partly inter-related problems: first the fact

that a large proportion of people in our societies feel that they are excluded because they have no power within society or that they are unable to participate fully in society because barriers exist that prevent this. They feel unable to develop fully on account of this and feel a sense of injustice and consequent resentment. The second problem is that the balance between individual freedom and central authority in society has not been satisfactorily resolved. While authoritarian regimes have been overthrown and democracy established in many parts of the world, many are now saying that the balance has shifted too far towards individualism and a lack of central authority, that the rampant freedom of the capitalist market has led to a danger of falling into a situation of the 'rule of the jungle', where the wealthiest and most powerful have free reign to do what they like. The same situation prevails within religions where fundamentalists and liberals are locked in conflict over the question of whether society should be subservient to the authority of traditional religious forms or whether religion should change and adapt to accommodate social realities.

## **Hierarchical, Hegemonic, Patriarchal Society**

Returning to the first of these two problems that society faces, the fact that a large number of people feel excluded from society to some extent, so pervasive is this that in fact, in most societies, the majority of people find that they face barriers of one sort or another. These may be barriers of gender, race, social class or even such things as the accent with which one speaks. But in all, it means that the majority of every society faces barriers to some degree, which mean that they are not treated equally, cannot advance in their occupation, cannot obtain the same services, cannot live in the same areas and cannot join in some activities in society. The barriers that are put up can be minor, such as just having to wait longer than others for the same service or they can be major such as finding that one's chosen occupation is barred to one.

Although there is lip service to equality in many Western societies, the reality that most people experience is one of constantly coming up against these barriers. Thus for example, in most Western nations, the principle of the equality between men and women has been acknowledged for almost a century and yet women say that they

experience what has been called a “glass ceiling” as they develop professionally and try to advance in their careers. They reach a point at which further progress seems to be denied them despite their having the qualifications for it. They see male colleagues with less experience and perhaps even fewer qualifications being promoted ahead of them.

This same experience of facing barriers to progress is also experienced by people from racial and ethnic minorities, from the lower social classes and by many other groups. In fact the only people who do not experience this and who therefore obtain the full benefits of society are, in Western societies, educated white males from the upper strata of society. It is usually these people who are in positions where they are analysing their society in an authoritative manner and initiating change. Thus the social structure is hierarchical and highly competitive. That which is given the highest value in such societies are power, authority, control, victory, ownership, courage, strength. The main interactions are power struggles and competition. The ends justify the means. Results are expressed in terms of victory or defeat. There are only rewards for the winners in such a society, none for the runners-ups. It is epitomised by tradition, institutions, civilisation, law, and control over the natural world. Those who have power and wealth are valued, considered important, are consulted about major decisions and are listened to when they protest. Those who have no power or wealth are not valued, not considered important, are not consulted on major decisions and not listened to when they protest. As a result of having their ideas disparaged and discounted as they grow up, they often cease to have ideas of their own and merely repeat what the newspapers and political demagogues tell them is true. Decisions in such societies are made by just one man or a small group of men and are then handed down to be carried out. The social structures in these societies are pyramidal with one or a few people at the top and increasing numbers as one goes down. This is what is meant by a hierarchical society.

The fundamental problem underlying this situation is the fact that we live in societies that are patriarchal or hegemonic. The word patriarchy means ‘rule by men’ and implies a domination of society by men. The majority of positions of power and authority whether this be in government, business, professional or even in recreational and informal groups and societies are held by men. The concept of a patriarchal society goes, however, beyond just the fact of the gender



of those in authority. For example Britain went through a period of almost two decades when there was a female sovereign and female Prime Minister, but this did not change the fact that Britain was a patriarchal society. If a woman wants to reach the higher echelons of society, she must masculinize herself, become competitive and aggressive, become more male than the men. There is considerable evidence that girls are inherently less competitive and more co-operative than boys. Therefore in any society where power is the highest value and there are no other constraints, girls/women will usually be dominated by boys/men. In modern Western societies where almost all positions of power are awarded on the basis of competitiveness (either in the form of outright competition for the post or through interviews where competitiveness is given the highest value), the inevitable result is that men dominate most positions of power in the society. This is the patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup>

One might think that the sorts of totalitarian regimes that existed in Europe in the inter-war years of the twentieth century or which exist today in many parts of the world are the only remaining hierarchical societies and that democratic Western societies are not hierarchical but there is just as much of a hidden hierarchy in Western societies as in any totalitarian state. The relatively small number of people at the top of the hierarchy in Western states control the political process, the newspapers and other media, the education system, the justice system and all other important areas of life. Through this control, they also control the discourse of society. It is their opinions that are heard on the television, read in the newspapers and put into the textbooks studied at schools and universities; theirs is the only discourse that gets publicity and is thus regarded as the norm for the society; they have a hegemony over the norms, values and discourses of society. The voices of those lower down the hierarchy are ignored, considered unimportant and marginal; their experiences of social barriers and prejudice are regarded as the "rumblings of social malcontents". This is the hegemonic society.

Thus our modern societies, no matter where we live in the world, are hierarchical, patriarchal hegemonic societies. In the West, there may not be tanks in the streets enforcing the hierarchy, but all such societies depend upon force to maintain the pyramid of power. In the West, this compulsion is maintained through the law and the police force. This situation is not one that is easy to change. Those with

authority and power control the communications media and education. They therefore are in a position to impose their worldview on others. Women and other groups low down the hierarchy have one of two alternatives in this situation. They can accept the system and continue to hold a lower place in society. If they wish to try to beat the system can only do so by competing with those already in power.

Power is thus corrosive and subversive. Even in a democratic process, the attempt to gain power is itself corrosive. If a group wants to bring about social justice and a more egalitarian society, it has to gain power in order to bring this about. It thinks that if it gains power, it will control the state and then it can use the state to achieve its goals of social justice and a more egalitarian society. It forms a political party and starts to campaign to gain votes. But in this process, it is being diverted from its goal of achieving social justice and a more egalitarian society and its goal is now achieving power. Everything becomes subordinated to this goal. Achieving power now becomes the main goal of the group and other goals such as social justice become secondary. What happens in practice is that once the party is successful and has achieved power, the hierarchy remains the same B remaining in power has the highest priority. To this priority the lower goals such as social justice and a more egalitarian society are readily sacrificed. The people who voted for the party feel betrayed as they see the party chasing after those who wield influence and have social power and failing to implement anything that benefits them.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the values of the patriarchal, hierarchical hegemonic society are subversive; they subvert those that try to defeat them. This has been what successive revolutions from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards have found. The French Revolution and the various Communist Revolutions that have occurred have all been in the name of creating a more egalitarian society, where power is no longer the highest value. Those that led these revolutions were however forced to seize power and in doing so found their initial values subverted. The result was a society that was just as hierarchical as before, but with merely a different set of people in power.<sup>4</sup>

All groups that are low in the social hierarchy, whether women, racial and ethnic minorities or people of lower social class or status face much the same sorts of barriers and problems. Indeed if one considers that half of society is women and then adds in the various

ethnic and class groups who are also dominated by the white upper and middle class males who are at the top of the social hierarchy, one can see that in Western societies where we are all supposed to be equal, it is only a small percentage who have full access to the benefits and opportunities and the majority are a good deal less “equal” than them.

A further fact that makes it difficult to achieve any change is that in patriarchal societies, it is very difficult to even gain an acknowledgement of the fact that a problem exists. It is men from the dominant group who control the communications media and the education system; it they who are the journalists, the newspaper editors, the social analysts, the professors of social sciences and these men experience no barriers and therefore see no problem. The rhetoric coming from these leaders of society is that their societies are fair and democratic with equal opportunities for all. These individuals at the top of the hierarchy have not experienced life in the lower levels of the hierarchy, they have not come across any social barriers or obstacles in their careers or faced prejudice and injustice. They therefore can truthfully say that “ours is an open society; people get to the top through merit alone” – and therefore there is no need for any change.

## **The Bahá'í Answer to the Hierarchical, Hegemonic, Patriarchal Society**

It can be seen that because of its unseen barriers and subversive nature, it is not a very easy matter to contemplate changing such a society. The question then arises as to whether the Bahá'í Faith has any answers to this difficult situation. Since the Bahá'í Faith aims for equality between men and women and to bring into being a more egalitarian society, how does the Bahá'í Faith seek to resolve this problem? It can be seen from the above that a very radical change is needed and furthermore it must be a change that does not inherently find itself subverted.

Firstly of course, a set of values is needed that does not place power and wealth at the highest level; but this is perhaps the easiest part of the process. Most religions offer a set of values that emphasise the importance of values such as love, service, humility etc. and indeed most religions teach that wealth can be a barrier to spiritual progress. The Bahá'í Faith has similar teachings. There are a

large number of quotations from the Bahá'í scriptures asserting the equality of all human beings, for example, and others that assert the equality of men and women.

Even in the earliest stages of its history, the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths have been engaged in overturning the power structures that formed the foundations of society. When the Báb praised a simple sifter of wheat for having discerned the truth and recognized him before all of the learned class of Isfahan, when the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh asserted that understanding religious truth did not depend on the years of book learning that the Islamic learned classes engaged upon at their religious colleges but rather on purity and spiritual discernment that could be cultivated by anyone, they were in effect laying an axe to the foundations of the hegemonic social structure that prized the book learning of the religious class and gave them authority and privileges on account of that.

In a letter written on 14 March 1927 to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the Guardian's Secretary explained, on his behalf, the principle in the Cause of action by majority vote. He pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who "accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position" who caused division, and that it was those "who pretended to be the most distinguished of all" who "always proved themselves to be the source of contention." "But praise be to God," he continued, "that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified Assemblies. Even so, no Assembly has been invested with the absolute authority to deal with such general matters as affect the interests of nations. Nay rather, He has brought all the assemblies together under the shadow of one House of Justice, one divinely appointed Centre, so that there would be only one Centre and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division."<sup>5</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá carried this process forward defining some of the words associated with the hegemonic push towards competitiveness in such a way as to subvert their meanings. Thus for example,

regarding the word “victory”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that for the Bahá’í Cause: “*its victory is to submit and yield*” [SWAB 256] and he quotes Bahá’u’lláh as stating: “*Therefore, today, ‘victory’ neither hath been, nor will be opposition to anyone, nor strife with any person; but rather what is well-pleasing—this is, that the cities of men's hearts, which are under the dominion of the hosts of selfishness and lust, should be subdued by the sword of the Word of Wisdom, and of Exhortation.*”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá subverts the concept of competition from its usual role in a masculine society, that of gaining power, and instead promotes it as an approach in the arena of service: “*Vie ye with each other in the service of God and of His Cause. This is indeed what profiteth you in this world, and in that which is to come*” [qtd in ADJ 83]. The goal of personal ambition and the source of greatest glory do not belong, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s estimation, to the person who seizes power but to the person who excels in service to “*human uplift and betterment*” [PUP 353] and to “*the cause of the Most Great Peace*” [PUP 123].

It is all very well to have egalitarian values and to subvert the foundations of the hegemonic society, but the question remains of what you put in its place. Many individuals and groups have had these principles but have not been able to transform them into practice because of the subversive nature of power. What is needed is to have some way to get these values prevalent in society without having them subverted. How does one set up a community that is more egalitarian? The Bahá’í community in fact provides a model for just such a social system.

First, the Bahá’í community does not contend for power. Those who have wanted to change society have always thought that the way to do this is to seize control of the state and that it would then be possible to use the power of the state to change society. They have therefore either taken the revolutionary road to power (as in the French Revolution and the various communist revolutions) or they have tried the democratic route, as with various democratic socialist parties. Apart from the pitfall of the subversion of their egalitarian values which has been discussed above and which they all suffered, what they have failed to appreciate is that the power of the state is largely illusory. The state is but one element in a nexus of actors and by itself, it has only a limited ability to make changes. It cannot by itself

change the social structure, for example, since it is the social structure that is supporting the state and to try to change it risks destabilizing the state itself. The Bahá'í community eschews the route to power as a means of effecting a change in society. It refrains from all involvement in partisan politics, recognising that any such involvement risks subverting its values and ultimately frustrating its goals.

Second, in the Bahá'í community power does not rest with individuals. There are no priests or any other religious professionals with any special power or authority by virtue of their position. Authority rests with institutions acting as institutions. It is true of course that individuals are elected onto these institutions but these individuals hold no power or authority in their own right. Even the chairman of a National Spiritual Assembly, the national governing body of the Bahá'ís in an area, has no individual authority. A member of the National Spiritual Assembly is still subject to the authority of the local governing board, the Local Spiritual Assembly, in the area where he or she lives. All authority rests with the institutions making decisions as a body. There are individual appointments made to positions such as the Boards of Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board, but these appointees play only an exhortatory and advisory role. They hold no authority or power.

Third, decisions are made in the Bahá'í community through consultation. The Bahá'í process of consultation is one which encourages all those taking part to participate. This helps to draw out members of minority groups and races as well as lower social classes who do not feel confident enough to speak in group settings. The Bahá'í ideal of consultation provides a safe and encouraging environment for such people to express their views. Indeed, just as men are better at competition, women are inherently better in the co-operative environment produced by the consultation process. In such an environment, they therefore feel comfortable in putting forward their views (which is not the case in a highly competitive environment) and they are able to play a major role in Bahá'í community life.

There are also other provisions in Bahá'í community life which are aimed at encouraging minorities. The Bahá'í Faith has been spread through planned action. In these plans, a deliberate effort has been made to bring into the community every type of minority living in a

particular area. This has been assisted by having, as part of these same plans, Bahá'í literature translated into as many languages as possible. Another example is the fact that, in Bahá'í elections, if there is a tied vote, then if one of those tied is from a minority, that person is automatically declared the winner of the tie.

## **A Practical Path to a Different Society**

It is however, in the last two decades that the Bahá'í community has produced a practical path forward that all, whether Bahá'í or not, can follow in creating a more egalitarian society. Since about 1996, the Bahá'í community has been engaged in a programme of action that works to mitigate and counter many of the worst features of the hierarchical society. The central feature of this programme is a course of participatory learning designed to develop the human resources within a community. The course encourages people, especially those at the base of the power pyramid who have been used to having their ideas disparaged and discounted and have ceased to think for themselves, to start to think, to develop ideas, and, in the protected consultative environment of the course, to start to have the confidence to express those ideas. Furthermore, the course focuses on the spiritual aspects of the human being, encouraging the growth of a spirit of selflessness and service. As a result, people are encouraged to engage in acts of service. They are initially trained to do such service as organising children's moral education classes, junior youth empowerment programmes, devotional meetings, home visits and accompanying others in their path of service. These acts of service then enable participants to have ideas about the needs of the community and how to address these. Thus participants in the courses are trained not only to develop their own ideas and have the confidence to express them but also, through acts of service, they begin to see the reality around them and to have thoughts about how to address the problems of their community.

All of this is then brought to the cluster reflection meetings where those attending reflect on what has occurred previously and with input from Bahá'í administrative bodies and from ideas arising from their own study groups and service projects, they consult upon the needs of the area and how these can be addressed realistically with the resources available. These study courses and reflection meetings are

not confined to Bahá'ís. Anyone interested can engage with this process, can take part in the study courses, can carry out the acts of service and can participate in the reflection meetings. In this way, the power to change their own community is devolved down in a meaningful way to the members of that community.

If we were to create in this way more egalitarian societies, this would not just solve the problem that large numbers of people feel alienated and unjustly treated by the structures of the hierarchical society, it would help towards resolving other social problems as well. To reduce the competitiveness and aggressiveness associated with the patriarchal, hegemonic society would also be a major step towards world peace since this competitiveness and aggressiveness also feeds across from a society's internal affairs into its external foreign affairs and results in undue aggressiveness and lack of co-operation at the international level. A higher value being placed on co-operation within our societies would result in a higher level of co-operation in global affairs and in resolving global problems. The greater involvement of women in social affairs would in itself also be conducive to world peace according to the Bahá'í teachings.

The competitiveness of the business world is a major contributor to pollution and environmental degradation. The competitiveness that the patriarchal society demands results in an inexorable pressure to reduce costs often with the result of increased pollution. If local environmental regulations prevent this pollution then modern business instead of accepting this as a price worth paying moves its factories to elsewhere in the world where the environmental regulations are not so strict. Unfortunately although the environmental regulations are local in their effects, the pollution caused by these companies respects no borders and is world-wide in its effects. A society that is not so driven by the urge to be competitive would also be inherently less polluting.

Thus to produce more egalitarian less hierarchical societies would help in the resolution of many of the problems that the world faces from the alienation and sense of injustice that breeds civil unrest, vandalism and violence to global problems such as war and environmental pollution.



## Individualism and Authority

A second area that is causing a deal of turmoil for many because it is a problem that has not been successfully resolved in any society is the balance between individuality and authority in society and the associated problem of how to maintain a balance between centralised national or international authority and local initiative and independence. The balance between these has not been successfully achieved in any society. In those societies that have swung too far towards individuality, the cult of the individual threatens the cohesion and moral order of society. Using the pretext of personal freedom, some individuals are subjecting others to virtual slavery (driving the poor into financial debt that makes them virtual slaves of the owners of their debts), sexual abuse, and the physical and sexual abuse of children. The opposite extreme is that of the sort of collectivism seen in communist societies, where the individual is suppressed completely, supposedly for the benefit of the community. Neither extreme allows either full human development or human prosperity. Of course, all human beings are individuals and must be given the freedom to develop their talents and potential, but to allow that freedom to go to excess, where human beings are given the freedom to sink to the level of animal behaviour and to oppress others stunts human development and causes society to fall apart in corruption and moral decadence. Similarly excessive centralized control stifles human initiative and leads to loss of morale and enthusiasm for projects because people do not feel involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

These two extremes of excessive individualism and excessive control can be seen operating in many situations in the world. Broadly speaking, the United States of America leans towards the extreme of individualism and rights to liberty in all areas. In practice, this means that those with money and power use this liberty to control the communications media and the political process to their advantage and in order to impose their aims on society. Thus paradoxically, in precisely those societies where the most freedom is given to the individual, the result is that the individual is most manipulated by commercial and other interests. Western Europe has, on the other hand, moved towards centralized control and many aspects of daily life are regulated by the centralized authority of the

European Union. The result is that people feel remote from the decision-making process and therefore feel increasingly justified in rebelling against it or ignoring it. There are of course many areas of the world where centralized authoritarian political regimes go much further than Europe and these regimes suppress individual initiative even more and result in a loss of morale and initiative in their populations.

These extremes are not confined to political structures however. Matters such as international aid have swung across the pendulum from a strict centralised control of methods and means of deploying international aid — often leading to inappropriate aid being given because the people at the centre do not know what is appropriate — to a much more relaxed system with decisions being made locally — often resulting in corruption and dissipation of effort. In religions in particular this tension can be seen as one of the most prominent features of religious life in the past century. In almost every religious group there is some degree of conflict between those who hold to a strict central doctrinal and organisational authority in the religion (often associated with religious fundamentalism) and those who want to free the individual believers to think freely about religious ideas and to experience the religion in ways that suit each individual (often described as religious liberalism).

In the Bahá'í Faith there are several aspects to achieving the right balance between individual liberty and centralized authority. While Bahá'u'lláh on the one hand applauds democracy and commends Queen Victoria for having “*entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people*” [PB 34],<sup>7</sup> he also, on the other hand, condemns the excess of liberty that leads to libertarianism and states that it will “*exercise a pernicious influence upon men*” [GWB 216]. Shoghi Effendi summarises this by stating that “The Bahá'í conception of social life... neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an anti-social creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the ‘golden mean’” [UD 435-436].

As in the case of achieving a more egalitarian society, there are many groups and movements other than the Bahá'ís who agree with Shoghi Effendi's view that the ideal is to achieve this ‘golden mean’. However in practice, we find that societies and groups either gravitate towards one extreme or the other or else they swing like a

pendulum between the two extremes. It appears that no society or large group has succeeded in finding a way of remaining at the 'golden mean'. It is in the practicalities of how to achieve this state that they have failed.

Once again, the Bahá'í community provides a model of how to achieve this balance. This is achieved in the Bahá'í community through an innovative separation between power and authority. In most societies, organisation and groups, it is taken for granted that those in authority should also be given the power to enforce their authority. Thus mechanisms of enforcement are enacted to compel those who are members of that society or group to follow the directives of those that are in authority. These may be laws for a society or codes of discipline in organisations or rules in the case of groups. Those who are in authority are given the power to sanction whoever fails to follow their directives.

In the Bahá'í community, however, there is an attempt to separate authority and power to some extent. We have noted above that individuals have neither authority nor power in the Bahá'í community. The elected institutions of the Bahá'í community have the authority to direct the affairs of the community, but their obligation is to try to achieve their objectives through winning the support of the individual Bahá'ís. Shoghi Effendi addressing primarily the members of the elected Bahá'í institutions states:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other. [BA 63-64]

The elected Bahá'í institutions have, in effect, very little power to enforce their authority in many areas when compared with the central authorities of other religions. They have no doctrinal authority; no authority to determine correct doctrine or to create new doctrine or theological teachings, nor to interpret the texts of the scripture. Thus they hold no power in many areas over which religious leadership has

traditionally held both power and authority. They have the authority to direct the Bahá'í community by laying out plans of action for the Bahá'ís, but they have no sanctions or other means of compelling the Bahá'ís to carry out these plans. If any Bahá'í, for example, wants to completely ignore the present Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice, they are free to do so without any fear of sanctions against them. The general situation is summed up in the words of the Universal House of Justice thus:

Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers.<sup>8</sup>

The power that the elected institutions have over the believers can only be exercised in extreme situations and is thus rarely encountered by the average Bahá'í. This power involves Bahá'ís who actions go outside certain limits. These include for example administrative sanctions against Bahá'ís who bring the Bahá'í Faith into disrepute, perhaps by their disregard for the moral code of society (however what Bahá'ís do privately is not usually a cause of action by the Bahá'í institutions). More severe sanctions are taken towards those who seek to create division and sectarianism in the Bahá'í community (however holding differing opinions is not sanctionable, it is only when an individual attempts to create a sect or grouping around such an opinion that sanctions may be applied). The overwhelming majority of Bahá'ís will not however experience this.

If Bahá'ís have such freedom of thought and freedom to disregard the exhortations of their institutions, what is it then that preserves the unity of the Bahá'í community (for if the Bahá'í Faith is to achieve its stated goal of uniting humanity, it is obvious that it itself must remain united). The principal mechanism whereby the individual is granted freedom of thought in the Bahá'í Faith and yet unity is maintained is that of the Covenant. In the Bahá'í Faith, there is no doctrine or creed about the nature of God or the nature of Bahá'u'lláh to which the individual is obliged to assent. Bahá'ís are free to read the scriptures for themselves and to come to their understanding of theological matters. The only limit on Bahá'ís is that they cannot claim that their understanding of theological matters is authoritative or binding on any other Bahá'í (and thereby attempt to set up a cabal or sectarian grouping). Only the interpretations of

'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are authoritative. Since both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are deceased, their writings have effectively become part of the scripture or authoritative text. There is no longer any living authoritative interpretation in the Bahá'í Faith. What preserves the unity of the Bahá'í community in the face of this ideological individualism is the concept of the Covenant – that all Bahá'ís pledge themselves to obeying the instructions of the Focal Centre of the Covenant, which since 1963 has been the Universal House of Justice. Since the Universal House of Justice is not a body that creates doctrine or dogma but rather a body that directs the affairs of the Bahá'í community, obedience to the instructions of the Focal Centre of the Covenant does not limit the individual's freedom to think whatever they wish about theological matters, but only their freedom to act in ways that would set up sects and cliques around such individual interpretation.

Another aspect of the balance between centralized authority and local democracy in the Bahá'í community is the fact that the authority and powers of the local governing councils of the Bahá'í community have been laid down in authoritative Bahá'í texts. The local governing councils have inherent rights over matters that are purely confined to their locality, an authority that cannot be removed by the decision of the national body. Thus one cannot have the situation that has occurred in many countries where the local governing authorities have had their rights stripped away by the desire of the national government to centralize and control all aspects of the nation's life.

In all aspects of Bahá'í community life, the emphasis is on decentralization – handing down to the local level everything that can appropriately be administered at the local level. “It [the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh] repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity” [WOB 42]. But to offset problems that may arise from such decentralization – where local prejudices may discriminate against some individuals or groups, individual Bahá'ís are given substantial powers to appeal the decisions of their local body to the national and even, if necessary, to the international level.

In the pre-modern period, individuals, except for the elite in society were given a script at birth which they were expected to

follow and which severely limited their choices in all aspects of their lives. This script however, as long as they followed, gave them a socially-recognised identity, a guaranteed place in society and made them feel included in the workings of their community. The individualism of contemporary society means that people are free to tear up the script that they are given at birth and write their own script in terms of their individual choices. This individualism, however, leaves most individuals with no assigned or recognized social interactions that can make them feel part of a community, an anomie resulting in no social structure to which a person can relate. Throughout most of human history it has been religion that formed the glue binding individuals to their communities. Having cast religion aside, most individuals in the twentieth century experimented with various social and political ideologies, such as communism, nationalism and racism, which tried to take the place of religion in linking the individual into a community. All of ideologies failed with disastrous consequences for the societies that tried to adopt them. What the Bahá'í Faith offers is a modern religion, free of the superstition and irrationality that marks much of traditional religion, and offering a pathway for the individual to link into a community united in constructive action and service; giving that individual interpersonal links that can give that person a feeling of belonging and interconnectedness.

## The Maturity of Humanity

I would like to suggest that these two aspects of the social dynamics of the Bahá'í community which we have discussed, the removal of hierarchies of power and the achievement of a balance between society and the individual, can be thought of as related to the statement that has been made by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi: that humanity is just entering its collective stage of maturity.

*No sooner had mankind attained the stage of maturity, than the Word revealed to men's eyes the latent energies with which it had been endowed – energies which manifested themselves in the plenitude of their glory when the Ancient Beauty appeared, in the year sixty, in the person of 'Alí-Muhammad, the Báb. [Bahá'u'lláh: GWB 77-78]*

*Similarly, there are periods and stages in the life of the aggregate world of humanity, which at one time was passing through its degree of childhood, at another its time of youth but now has entered its long presaged period of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere visible and apparent. Therefore, the requirements and conditions of former periods have changed and merged into exigencies which distinctly characterize the present age of the world of mankind ... The gifts and graces of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of the world of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity. The playthings of childhood and infancy no longer satisfy or interest the adult mind. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá: PUP 438-439]*

Such is the stage to which an evolving humanity is collectively approaching. The Revelation entrusted by the Almighty Ordainer to Bahá'u'lláh, His followers firmly believe, has been endowed with such potentialities as are commensurate with the maturity of the human race — the crowning and most momentous stage in its evolution from infancy to manhood. [Shoghi Effendi: WOB 165]

If one considers this metaphor, then it can be seen that what we have been discussing in this paper fits this metaphor well. When one is dealing with children, one imposes a hierarchy of power over them and instructs them as what they should do and not do. One has both power and authority over them. In the same way, in accordance with the Bahá'í model of progressive revelation, the religions that came during the collective infancy of humanity encouraged and resulted in hierarchical forms of society where people who had power and learning dominated those who did not. As a child grows into adolescence and eventually to maturity, the wise parents will gradually reduce the orders and instructions given to the child and increasingly allow the child to take responsibility for itself. They hand the power that they exerted over the individual as a child over to that individual once he or she reaches adolescence and maturity. This flattening of hierarchies and handing over power to mature responsible individuals can be seen as the appropriate response as humanity reaches its collective maturity. The Bahá'í teachings maintain that this is now the stage in the evolution of humanity's

social life where this collective maturity is occurring and a new social order is needed to accommodate this change.

## Conclusion

One objection that can be raised is that while these considerations may be true of the Bahá'í community, can they be applied to society as a whole. Can one, for example, really run a society in which the local or national administrative authorities do not have power? Of course, one has to say immediately that where extremes of human behaviour are concerned – criminal activity, for example – then the authorities must also have the power to arrest, try and punish such individuals. But the Bahá'í administrative institutions have those powers to deal with such extreme individuals also, as mentioned above. However, in the lives of ordinary people going about their everyday activities, the Bahá'í teachings would point towards a greater reliance on the maturity and sense of responsibility of individuals to be given the power to regulate their own affairs. This would involve the handing over by national government to local authorities of a greater degree of the responsibility for the conduct of all local matters such as education, health and policing. But it would in turn mean a far greater involvement, through genuine consultative processes, of the individual citizens in the running of their local communities. Individual citizens would in turn have to take the responsibility of educating themselves in local issues so that they are not manipulated by single-issue pressure groups or vested commercial and financial interests.

This approach has wide-ranging implications in many aspects of social life beyond just that of the political system. In relationship to employment practices, this approach would also mean the rolling back of the present trend towards ever greater management control of workers in both the public and private sector, allowing people to do their jobs without incessantly seeking to control the way they do their jobs and setting targets and requiring paper-work which both consumes time and distorts activity.

Of course such rolling back of the power of both individuals and institutions cannot occur without a corresponding advance in the sense of responsibility and the maturity of individuals so that the



vacuum created is adequately filled. This requires individuals who are mature enough to participate in social activity in a constructive and balanced manner. It requires an uprightness of conduct and a commitment to social involvement by all of the individuals in a society well in excess of what is the current norm. This in turn requires spiritual resources in the individual which is, of course, a subject that is too large to go into in this paper.

The whole process can envisaged as a disempowerment of the hierarchy of power and an empowerment of individuals to take over many of the essential social functions at present being carried out, in an unsatisfactory and unjust manner, by the power hierarchy. There will undoubtedly be a continuing need for an authority structure to coordinate more complex social functions at the local level and also those activities that are better managed at a regional and national level. Such institutions, which will of course be elected bodies, will also need to have powers of last resort in matters of criminality and social deviance. But the principle of de-centralization means that these wider social functions and powers will be kept to a minimum. At present, most activities that affect the lives of ordinary Bahá'ís are consulted upon and decided at the local level at reflection meetings by the people involved themselves. It seems likely then that in government also most activities that affect the lives of ordinary people will be consulted upon, agreed and carried out by the people involved themselves. The present Bahá'í administrative order provides a model for the functioning of such a social structure.

It is, however, worth pointing out that the Bahá'í community as a whole, after several decades of concentrating upon the geographical expansion of the Bahá'í Faith is now engaged, in the latest Five-Year Plans upon activities which are designed to create precisely the sort of human resources that would be needed for the successful application of such a model of community and society: training programmes to help individuals to take part in consultative decision-making. This is moreover, not just a training programme for Bahá'ís; rather it is thrown open to all to both participate in the training and participate in the programmes of social action that emerge from the training. The stated aim of the present plans in the Bahá'í community is to move from the type of community characterised by the passivity

of the congregation to one where the brunt of the activity and responsibilities are borne by the membership as a whole.

Of course the Bahá'í community is only at the very beginning of this process. At present, the Bahá'í community still largely reflects the wider society. Most Bahá'í communities are still run by a handful of individuals. But during the twentieth century, great strides were taken in transferring power and authority from individuals to institutions, followed by a process of devolving power and authority from central institutions to local institutions. The final part of this process – developing the capabilities of the generality of the community so that power can be handed on to them and they will take up this responsibility – is the aims of the current series of Five-Year Plans.

Lastly, I think all of this also has great implications for the way in which Bahá'ís present themselves. Bahá'ís have been used to presenting the Bahá'í Faith as having the answers to all of society's ills. This can seem arrogant to some and naive to others. It would seem preferable and closer to reality to present the Bahá'í community as one that has a mechanism through which all, whether Bahá'ís or merely interested individuals, can gather, consult and create together plans of social action designed to solve problems of society.

In the West, the Bahá'ís are facing a situation where there is a new religious scene that is affecting them very negatively. The main feature of this scene is the fact that, while an interest in spiritual matters is undoubtedly increasing, the type of religiosity that is on the increase is not assisting the Bahá'í Faith. There are two main areas in which religion is on the rise:

1. Ultra-traditionalist religion – in almost all parts of the world, the traditional religion of each area is seeing a resurgence of what is usually called fundamentalism. The uncertainties and bewildering choices open to people in modern life together with the accompanying decline in morals and standards as people take advantage of the freedoms given to them by modern society has caused a reaction whereby people are turning back to the certainties and what they perceive to have been the higher moral standards of traditional religion. Such people want to turn the clock back two or three hundred years and return to a world where traditional religion and its accompanying traditional values and morals were the centre of

society. Clearly the Bahá'í Faith, representing as it does in every part of the world a new religion that is in competition with the traditional religion, is not going to find favour with such religiosity. (Of course the Bahá'í Faith does itself have very high moral and ethical standards and does agree with traditional religion in many areas and this is certainly an avenue that can be explored in presenting the Bahá'í Faith to people from such a background.)

2. New Age religiosity – people are increasingly rejecting formal affiliation with any organised and established religion in favour of a highly-individualised pick-and-mix type of religiosity. They take ideas from every type of religion, (often from Eastern religions: chakras, reincarnation, astrology, etc.) and dabble in various types of religious practice (such as meditation or repetitive chanting), ending up with a medley of ideas and practices that is to their liking. Such people will often attend Bahá'í meetings, express their admiration for some Bahá'í ideas, but they will refrain from actually joining the Bahá'í community, either because they firmly believe in some idea, such as reincarnation, that is rejected in the Bahá'í teachings or because they just do not feel comfortable joining an organised religious group. Perhaps a deeper underlying reason that many such people do not join the Bahá'í community is that the Bahá'ís do not offer the sort of quick-fix spirituality that is the claim made by many groups. To join the Bahá'í community involves oneself in commitment and a long hard spiritual struggle and such a prospect may not be enticing for such people. Also the Bahá'í community does not offer the sort of immediate experiential religion offered by many successful religious groups.

The result of all this is that the Bahá'í Faith is not benefiting from the resurgence of interest in things spiritual that has been occurring. It is neither a traditional religion to be able to benefit from the rise in fundamentalism, while people who are engaged in the New Age movement may express appreciation of its teachings and may adopt them into their personal spirituality, they are not likely to want to make the commitments that becoming a Bahá'í entails.

Therefore in relation to the question of the presentation of the Bahá'í Faith, what the above analysis is intended to demonstrate is that the Bahá'í community is addressing and has developed ways of tackling some of the major problems that beset human society.

Therefore it may be that in the present climate of pick-and-mix religiosity, of people not being willing to commit themselves to organised religion, it may be more productive to try to bring to people's attention the nature of the sort of society that the Bahá'í Faith is seeking to bring about and the steps the Bahá'í community is taking to bring this about – to show that this sort of society can deal with the social problems that we face and to demonstrate that this sort of society can resolve some of the tensions in modern society. The implication of this presentation of the Bahá'í Faith is of course that if one wishes to tackle these problems, the most effective way to do so would be to become part of a process that has a pattern of social dynamics with at least a potential for solving some of these problems, whether that be as a fully committed member of the Bahá'í Faith or as someone who merely wishes to participate in the processes, plans and activities being carried out.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, in "The Importance of Deepening," *Compilation of Compilations*, p. 230

<sup>2</sup> See analysis of this in Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*, London: Abacus, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> See the analysis of this in John Holloway, *Change The World Without Taking Power. The Meaning of Revolution Today*, London: Pluto Press 2002, pp. 13-18

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell's *Animal Farm* brilliantly describes this process.

<sup>5</sup> Translated from the Persian. The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, pp. 216-7

<sup>6</sup> Bahá'u'lláh quoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *A Traveller's Narrative*, trans. E.G. Browne, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891, vol. 2, p. 114

<sup>7</sup> cf. Kitab-i-Aqdas vs. 123-4

<sup>8</sup> From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to Continental Boards of Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies, October 1, 1969, in *The Continental Boards of Counsellors*, Wilmette, 1981, pp. 37-38

## A Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh<sup>1</sup>

provisional translation by Julio Savi and Faezeh  
Mardani

Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand  
crying, "I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my  
desire."<sup>2</sup>

O loving friend, I render thanks unto God that thou art, on the whole, in good health, and that the stainless mirror of thine heart telleth of the tokens and ecstasies of thy soul. May, God willing, thine heart's purpose be attained and thy soul's wish be fulfilled, although it is preferred that we purify this luminous tablet, which is among the pages of illuminated breasts, from the allusions of both and that we hasten naked unto the wide plain of the spirit, as it was said by the divine sage:

Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts,  
Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty's rose. [FV 60]  
One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two qiblas,  
Either one will please the Beloved, or will consent to one's  
passions.<sup>3</sup>

Not only the shirt but being itself becometh a veil, and otherness a curtain. The scholar of Shíráz hath said: "Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise."<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay, undoubtedly he would have not necessitated the Egyptian shirt, or an announcer bringing him the glad tiding, or an ambassador speaking to him. On the contrary, he would have perceived the pure and sanctified breezes from the north of the Spirit and he would have dwelt in perfect union with the Beloved.

He would have tasted the joy of the Divine Presence and the ecstasy of the flavor of subsistence from the fount of purity, and he would have obtained the eternal life and everlasting perpetuity, and he would have entered into the immortal Paradise after the spiritual resurrection. He would have seen a thousand Josephs circling in adoration without any voice of complaint and would have received the sweetness of the Egypt of fidelity from the City of the court of the Incomparable.

Yea, as long as the impurities of the world of multiplicity, whose only outcome is death, will not be destroyed and annihilated, the eternal countenance of His Face will not come out unconcealed from the veils, and the meaning of "Everything will perish except His own Face"<sup>5</sup> will not become manifest from the lucid brow. What else can I write? One ought to perceive the perfume of the Beloved from Uways' camel hair. As the *Mathnaví's* author says:

The perfume of the Beloved exaleth from the camel hair.

This camel is of the herd of that pearl who is Lord Uways.

However, the musky fragrance of the Beloved and the breezes of the Merciful have ceased to waft from the Yemen of the Friend.

Yea, the casket of the white pearl is concealed within the sea shell, inasmuch as the untouched pearl, which bestows perfect power upon the inner powers of the heart and adds the light of vision to intelligence, is more acceptable and agreeable. May its concealment be conducive to revelation, and its occultation be followed by an unveiling, or a child clarify this symbolic language, or a power break this seal.

When seeds are hidden in the earth, their inward secret  
becomes the verdure of the garden.<sup>6</sup>

Imagine what will the power of the Friend's arm do?

O dear one, thy Companion sayeth that one ought to be purified from the defilement of imitation, so that the Phoenix of the West may emerge from the Orient of the Beloved and wing its flight into the sanctified atmosphere of the Spirit, that is the city of the soul.

I swear by God! Even if the armies of death would ride at full gallop, they will not catch up with the dust lifted by this Horseman, and 'Isrá'íl, the angel of death, will stand as a servant at His door, ready to serve Him, and will implore favors from whoever is bound towards His sanctuary, that haply he may be accepted in the court of glory, and may circle in adoration in those lofty precincts, which are loftier than a shining star, and he may perceive.

Praise be to God! The breeze of love hath wafted and hath perfumed the assembly of intimacy. The Spirit hath intoned a new melody. The lovers of the desert of the intellect have swooned away because of the call from the Unseen. Such were the joy and the ecstasy and the delight and the happiness, that the breath of the Holy Spirit hath wafted from the moldering bones and Gabriel hath winged its flight on the wings of success. The Isráfil of life wondereth with which melody he could wake up these companions and beseecheth that haply he may share their swoon.

I will cease (from speech): the Sweetheart has begun to speak,  
be (all) ear — *and God best knoweth the right course.*<sup>7</sup>

In this day life hath come out of my body, It sayeth to me:  
*verily, unto Him shall we return.*<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ráfatí, *Má'akhidh* 3281-2. See also *Majmu'ih* 36:374-6.

<sup>2</sup> Rúmí, *Mystical Poems* 1:46, no. 51, v.14.

<sup>3</sup> Saná'í, *Díván* (Furúzánfar) 253.

<sup>4</sup> Háfiz, *Díván* 534, 308:9.

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<sup>5</sup> Koran 28:88, Yusuf Ali.

<sup>6</sup> Rúmí, *Mathnaví* 1:177.

<sup>7</sup> Rúmí, *Mathnaví* 3:3844.

<sup>8</sup> Rúmí, *Mathnaví* 3:3906, Koran 2:156.



# Ancient Poems as Means of Revelation, in an Early Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

## Abstract

This paper offers a provisional translation of a Persian Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Iraqi period [above]. The Tablet is rich in quotations from ancient Iranian poets. Our paper examines the importance of poetry in the history of the Faith and in its Writings. It analyzes the quoted poems and the many poetical metaphors used in the Tablet. It ends with a short commentary on the contents of the Tablet: absolute detachment is a fundamental prerequisite for attaining “unto the divine Presence.”

The authors learned about this Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh through a publication by Vahid Rafati, *Má'akhidh* 3:281-2. This book is part of a set of four Persian volumes, commendably published by Rafati, in which he lists one by one all verses quoted by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Their Writings and examines them in their contexts. This Tablet, wholly written in Persian, is also published in *Majmú'iy-i-Āthár-Qalam-i-A'lá* 36:374-6. According to Rafati it was revealed in Baghdad. The Iranian Bahá'í scholar Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil *Mázandarání* (ca. 1880-1957) states that it was revealed in Kurdistan (*Asráru'l-Āthár* 5:15). Its mystical subject is certainly typical of the Writings composed by Bahá'u'lláh in that period.

We have been especially impressed by this Tablet, not only because of its contents, that emphasizes absolute detachment as an

indispensable prerequisite for the “*attainment unto the Divine Presence*” [KI 141, ¶149], but also because in the short space of two pages offers six quotations of verses by three different poets. And this has appeared to us as a sign of the importance that Bahá’u’lláh ascribed to poetry.

## Poetry in the history of the Faith and in the Writings

Nabíl narrates that the Báb told him about a verse by Ḥáfiz which says: “O zephyr, shouldst thou pass by the banks of the Araxes, implant a kiss on the earth of that valley and make fragrant thy breath. Hail, a thousand times hail, to thee, O abode of Salma! How dear is the voice of thy camel-drivers, how sweet the jingling of thy bells!” [see *Díván* 537, no. 310, vv.1-2]:

It is the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit that causes words such as these to stream from the tongue of poets, the significance of which they themselves are oftentimes unable to apprehend. The following verse is also divinely inspired: ‘*Shíráz* will be thrown into a tumult; a Youth of sugar-tongue will appear. I fear lest the breath of His mouth should agitate and upset *Baghdád*.’<sup>1</sup> The mystery enshrined within this verse is now concealed; it will be revealed in the year after Him.” The Báb subsequently quoted this well-known tradition: “Treasures lie hidden beneath the throne of God; the key to those treasures is the tongue of poets. [DB 258-9]

Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá were both refined poets. One of “the first fruits of ... [Bahá’u’lláh’s] Divine Pen” that arrived into our hands is a Persian poem entitled *Rashḥ-i-‘Amá*, that was “revealed in *Tīhrán*” [GPB 121]. And *Rashḥ-i-‘Amá* is just one among many Persian and Arabic poems revealed by Bahá’u’lláh. Bahá’u’lláh praised Mírzá Maqṣúd, one of the believers who lived in Damascus and Jerusalem, because of a number of poems he sent to him, and described those poems as being “*like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love ... [he cherished] for God and His chosen ones ... [were] reflected*” [TB 175, Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd]. He wrote about poetry in general:

*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 in causing your tongues to unlock treasures and to reveal wisdom and mysteries. Let God be your fear 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 your Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised.* [provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami]<sup>2</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself wrote various poems both in Persian and Turkish. He pointed out the special value of words in poetry when He said: “*Poetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition*” [CC 2:78]. And reportedly said: “*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. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God*” [CH 167]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed His admiration for those among His fellows-prisoners who, like Nabíl-i-Zarandí, Darvish Šidq-‘Alí, Áqá Muhammad-Ibráhím, Ustad ‘Alí-Akbar and Jináb-i-Muníb [MF 32-6, 36-8, 81-2, 102-3, 145-7] had a fine poetical vein. He received poems from a number of Western Bahá’ís, which He often acknowledged with words of approval. To James Simpson, He wrote that his poems showed that he was “*ablaze with the burning fire of the love of God,*” that he had “*secured a share and portion from the bounty of the Spirit and ... purposed 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]. To Marie Watson He wrote that her poems were “*in the utmost sweetness and delicacy*” [Tablets to Bahais 307]. To Louise R. Waite, who was both a poetess and a musician, and to whom He conferred the title of Shahnáz – which is the name of a musical mode – He wrote that her poems were “*in the utmost eloquence and sweetness*” [Recent Tablets 318], “*wonderful*

*... fluent ... and ... most thrilling*” [Tablets revealed 198], “*sweet melodies in the Rose garden of the love of God*” [Tablets to Bahais 276], “*the cause of the gladness of their hearers*” [Recent Tablets 318], and that their “*vibration*” would “*forever, give pleasure to the ears of the children of the Kingdom*” [Tablets to Bahais 276]. He advised her, to strive “*in the composition of such pieces, so that at all times the river of pure poesy may flow from ... [her] tongue*” [Tablets revealed 198]. To other poets, whose names have not been identified, He wrote: “*I chanted thy poem. Its significance was beautiful, its composition eloquent and its words excellent. It was like the melody of the birds of holiness in the paradise of El-Abha ... Blessed art thou for uttering forth such an excellent poem and brilliant pearl*” [Tablets 1: 57]. And also: “*Verily, I read thy poem, which contained new significances and beautiful words. My heart was dilated by its eloquent sense*” [Tablets 1:58]. And moreover: “*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*” [Tablets 1:59]. And finally: “*Thy poetry was received. The context was elegant. The words were eloquent and the theme, the Manifest Light. Consequently, it was highly appreciated*” [Tablets 3:546]. He openly encouraged some of those poets. He wrote to one of them: “*Verily, these verses shall be sung in the divine meetings and in the assemblages of the spiritual in the course of ages and centuries to come, for thou hast uttered the praise of thy Lord and expressed significant meanings in eulogy of thy Lord, the Merciful, the Clement*” [Tablets 1:58]. And to another one: “*Endeavour 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*” [Tablets 1:59]. And finally: “*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*” [Tablets 3:669].

The earliest believers wrote poems and Shoghi Effendi describes “[t]he joyous feasts which these companions, despite their extremely modest earnings, continually offered in honor of their Beloved; the gatherings, lasting far into the night, in which they loudly celebrated, with prayers, poetry and song, the praises of the Báb, of Quddús and of Bahá’u’lláh” [GPB 135] in the late Baghdád period. No wonder then that both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew from the poetic Arabic and Persian legacy in the Writings which They revealed. Western

readers are especially familiar with the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, as works comprising many poetical quotations.

## Poems quoted in this Tablet

In this Tablet Bahá'u'lláh quotes Khájih Shamsu'd-Dín Muḥammad Ḥáfiz-i-Shirází (ca. 1318–1390), Mawláná Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmí (1207–1273) and Majdúd Saná'í (ca. 1045–ca. 1141). As to Ḥáfiz He quotes an hemistich from a ghazal, “a shorter, sonnet-like, lyrical form, observing mono-rhyme, the conventional meters and other prosodic rules” [Lewis, “Short Poem” 83]. As to Rúmí, He quotes a distich from a known ghazal at the beginning of the Tablet; and a distich of another ghazal, which has not yet been identified, in the context of the Tablet; He also quotes a distich from the Mathnaví in the context of, and two different distiches from the same Mathnaví, at the end of the Tablet. As to Saná'í, He quotes two distiches from a ghazal in the context of His Tablet.

The hemistich by Ḥáfiz says: “Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise.” The whole ghazal has been translated into English by Henri Wilberforce-Clark (1840–1905), an officer in the British India corps, first translator of the *Bústán* of Sa'dí (1257) and of the *Sikandar Námih* by Nízamí (ca. 1202) [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 534, no. 308]:

Ravished is my heart by one like a singing girl, clamour-  
exciter,  
False of promise, slayer by nature, and colour (of deceit)-  
mixer.  
A ransom for the rent garment of those of moon-face, be  
A thousand garments of piety and the khirka of austerity!  
In thanks for that that, in beauty, thou tookest from the  
(glorious) angel the ball of superiority,  
The cup, demand; and on Adam's dust, a little water  
sprinkle.  
Poor and shattered, to Thy court, I have come. A little pity,  
For, save attachment to Thee, attachment, mine is none.  
The slave, I am of that word that enkindleth the fire (of  
love):

Not (the slave of that word, that), in speech, dasheth cold  
water on the fierce fire (of love).

Come; for last night, to me, the invisible messenger spake,  
Saying: "In contentment's stage, be; from destiny, flee  
not."

Of thy own arm, be not proud; for in record it is:  
"In (by, under) the order of the king-maker a thousand  
arrayings."

In my coffin, put up the cup; so that, on the morning of  
rising,

I may, with wine, take from my heart the terror of the day  
up-rising and springing.

Between the lover and the Beloved, veil is none:

Hafiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise;  
and attain unto the Beloved.

It is a beautiful love poem, in which the "one like a singing girl" is the Beloved, with capital B. The poet sings His beauty, His cruelty, and his own dependence on Him. He concludes with a distich of high mysticism, whose second hemistich is quoted by Bahá'u'lláh, in which he mentions that he should be annihilated, so that he may be united with the Beloved. It is the usual concept of *faná*, which Bahá'u'lláh later on described in such Writings as the Seven Valleys, in the Valley of True Poverty and Utter Nothingness [SV 36-9], and Gems of Divine Mysteries, in the City of Absolute Nothingness [GDM 70-1, ¶101-4].

As to Rúmí, Bahá'u'lláh gives preference to him over other poets in this Tablet, as in other Writings, as for example the Seven Valleys. And thus He quotes Him five times, comprising at the beginning and at the end of the Tablet. His love towards Rúmí is demonstrated by an episode of His life, recorded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Master narrates in His description of the life of Ustád Ismá'íl, one of the companions who followed Bahá'u'lláh in the Holy Land, that:

*At one time, Bahá'u'lláh had written down an ode of Rúmí's for him, and had told him to turn his face toward the Báb and sing the words, set to a melody. And so as he wandered through the long dark nights, Ustád would sing these lines:*

*I am lost, O Love, possessed and dazed,  
 Love's fool am I, in all the earth.  
 They call me first among the crazed,  
 Though I once came first for wit and worth.  
 O Love, who sellest me this wine,  
 O Love, for whom I burn and bleed,  
 Love, for whom I cry and pine -  
 Thou the Piper, I the reed.  
 If Thou wishest me to live,  
 Through me blow Thy holy breath.  
 The touch of Jesus Thou wilt give  
 To me, who've lain an age in death.  
 Thou, both End and Origin.  
 Thou without and Thou within -  
 From every eye Thou hidest well,  
 And yet in every eye dost dwell. [MF 30-1]<sup>3</sup>*

The verse by Rûmî quoted at the opening of the Tablet reads as follows:

Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand  
 crying, 'I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my  
 desire.'

This ghazal has been entirely translated into English by both Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945), an expert in Sufism and especially in the work of Rûmî [*Selected Poems* 65-9, no. 16], and Arthur John Arberry (1905-1969), the well-known British orientalist [*Mystical Poems* 1:46, no. 51, v. 14]. It comprises 24 verses, and thus like many of Rûmî's ghazal is quite longer than usual ghazals, which according to the Italian Iranist Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988) comprise "generally not less than five and no more than twelve" ["Ghazal. ii. In Persian literature"]. The Bahá'í world knows its verse 20, "In one hand the wine-cup, in one hand the tresses of the Friend. Such a dance in the midst of the market-place is my desire!", because Shoghi Effendi adds this note to the *Dawn Breakers* [DB 620n1]:

The extraordinary heroism with which Sulaymán Khán bore these frightful tortures is notorious and I have repeatedly heard it related how he ceased not during the long agony which he endured to testify his joy that he should be accounted worthy to suffer martyrdom for his Master's cause. He even sang and recited verses of poetry, amongst them the following: "I have returned! I have returned! I have come by the way of Shíráz! I have come with winsome airs and graces! Such is the lover's madness!" "Why do you not dance," asked the executioners mockingly, "since you find death so pleasant?" "Dance!" cried Sulaymán Khán. "In one hand the wine-cup, in one hand the tresses of the Friend. Such a dance in the midst of the market-place is my desire!" [Browne, "A Traveller's Narrative," Note T, pp. 333-4]

Its central theme is the quest after the Perfect Man. But it also can be interpreted as the quest after a human being that has made great progress on the path of spiritual quest, among many other spiritual immature human beings. This is the whole poem in Arberry's translation:

Show your face, for the orchard and rosegarden are my  
desire; open your lips, for abundant sugar is my  
desire.

Sun of beauty, come forth one moment out of the cloud,  
for that glittering, glowing countenance is my  
desire.

Out of your air I heard the sound of the falcon-drum; I  
returned, for the sultan's forearm is my desire.

You said capriciously, "Trouble me no more; be gone!" That  
saying of yours, "Trouble me no more," is my desire,  
And your repulse, "Be gone, the king is not at home," and  
those mighty airs and brusqueness of the  
doorkeeper, are my desire.

In the hand of every one who exists there are filings of  
beauty; that quarry of elegance and that mine are my  
desire.



This bread and water of heaven's wheel are like a  
treacherous torrent; I am a fish, a leviathan, Oman is  
my desire.

Like Jacob I am crying alas, alas; the fair visage of Joseph  
of Canaan is my desire.

By Allah, without you the city is a prison for me; I wander  
abroad, mountain and desert are my desire.

My heart is weary of these weak-spirited fellow-travellers;  
the Lion of God and Rustam-i Dastán are my desire.

My soul is sick of Pharaoh and his tyranny; that light of the  
countenance of Moses son of 'Imrán is my desire.

I am weary of these tearful people so full of complaining;  
that ranting and roaring of the drunkards is my  
desire.

I am more eloquent than the nightingale, but because of  
vulgar envy a seal is on my tongue, and lamentation  
is my desire.

Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand,  
crying, "I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my  
desire."

They said, "He is not to be found, we too have searched."  
He answered, "He who is not to be found is my  
desire."

Though I am penniless, I will not accept a small carnelian,  
for that rare, precious carnelian is my desire.

Hidden from every eye, and all things seen are from Him —  
that hidden One manifest in works is my desire.

My state has gone beyond every desire and yearning; from  
mine and place to the elements is my desire.

My ear heard the tale of faith and became drunk; where is  
the portion of sight? The form of faith is my desire.

In one hand the winecup, in the other the Beloved's curl —  
to dance so in the midst of the arena is my desire.

That rebeck says, "I am dead of expectation; the hand and  
bosom and plectrum of 'Uthmán are my desire."

I am at once Love's rebeck, and Love is my rebeck-player;  
 those favours of the plucking of the All-merciful are  
 my desire.

Cunning minstrel, number the rest of this ode after this  
 fashion, for it is after this fashion I desire.

Show your face from the east, Sun of the Pride of Tabriz; I  
 am the hoopoe, the presence of Solomon is my  
 desire.

The second quoted ghazal by Rûmî is as follows:

The perfume of the Beloved exaleth from the camel hair.

This camel is of the herd of that pearl who is Lord Uways.

Rafati writes that he did not find this distich in the edition of the Díván by Rûmî edited by Şafî 'Alî Sháh in 1361 or 1982-83 AD [*Má'akhidh* 2:275]. We too could not find it in the edition of Rûmî's Díván published by the website RíRÁ, the Free Persian Digital Library, providing access to Persian literature in public domain. This distich will be commented upon in the part of this paper devoted to the poetical language of the Tablet.

The first distich from Rûmî's *Mathnaví* quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in our Tablet is as follows:

When seeds are hidden in the earth, their inward secret  
 becomes the verdure of the garden. [*Mathnaví* 1:177]

This distich is part of a story that narrates of a great king who saw a slave girl, fell in love with her, and bought her, but the girl became sick and none of the king's physicians could heal her. Finally, one day the king found a doctor, who was well known for his special skill. He brought him to his slave and the physician asked to be left alone with her. In his interview with the slave he discovered that the cause of her sickness was that she was in love with a goldsmith from Samarkand. The doctor promised the girl that he would help her, but asked her not to reveal her secret to anyone else. And Rûmî comments upon this advice as follows:

The Prophet said that any one who hides his inmost thought  
 will soon attain to the object of his desire.

When seeds are hidden in the earth, their inward secret  
becomes the verdure of the garden.

If gold and silver were not hidden, how would they get  
nourishment (grow and ripen) in the mine? [ibid.  
1:176-8]

Two verses from this long story are quoted in the Four Valleys:

Let us write, some other way,  
Love's secrets — better so. [*Mathnaví* 1:136, SV 64]

Leave blood and noise and all of these,  
And say no more of Shams-i-Tabriz. [*Mathnaví* 1:142, SV 65]

The two distiches quoted at the end of the Tablet are as follows:

I will cease (from speech): the Sweetheart has begun to  
speak, be (all) ear — *and God best knoweth the right  
course.* [Rúmi, *Mathnaví* 3:3844]

In this day life hath come out of my body, It sayeth to me:  
*verily, unto Him shall we return.* [see Rúmi, *Mathnaví*  
3:3906, Koran 2:156]

The first distich repeats a typical *topos* of Persian lyrical poetry: at the end of a discourse the poet states that he has concluded his argument. In this case, he explains that whenever the Beloved speaks, any other voice becomes superfluous. The second one ascribes silence to the attainment unto annihilation.

Finally, Bahá'u'lláh quotes two distiches by Saná'í. The first one also is quoted in the Four Valleys:

*Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts,  
Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty's rose. [SV 60]  
[which could also be translated: With that rose bud  
no one sleeps with a shirt.]*

*One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two qiblas,  
Either one will please the Beloved, or will consent to one's  
passions.*

These verses are part of a ghazal which says:

Don the garb of faith, so that you may last forever; if  
you won't die in this garb, you will become  
rotten with your shroud.

Faith swallows this and the Other world in a breath, as  
soon as the leviathan of its pain opens its mouth.

One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two  
qiblas. Either one will please the Beloved or will  
consent to one's passions.

Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of  
hearts, Never the shrouded soul unite with  
beauty's rose. [SV 60]

Do not lift the veil of continence and shame from the  
face of belief, that you may not be bewitched by  
the evil eye of the unworthy.

Walk by the Qur'án, 'cause whoever takes refuge in the  
Qur'án escapes the torments of the Other world  
and the temptations of this one.

[Saná'í, Díván [Furúzánfar] 253, translated from the  
Persian by the authors, except the couplet marked SV 60,  
translated by Gail; see Radmihr, *Samavát* 558].

These two distiches also suggest detachment. It is symbolized in the first one by the shirt, which the lower should take off, if he wants to be really close to the Beloved; in the second one by the two qiblihs, one of which — that of passion — should be abandoned, while preserving only that of the Beloved.

## Images used in the Tablet

This Tablet is written in the imaginative language typical of Persian mystics, as most of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings revealed in the Iraqi period. Some of the images may prove less comprehensible for Westerners and thus some of them will be shortly explained.

## The Tablet of the Heart

At the beginning of this Tablet Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*May, God willing, thine heart’s purpose be attained and thy soul’s wish be fulfilled, although it is preferred that we purify this luminous tablet (lawḥ-i-núr), which is among the pages of illuminated breasts (ṣafaḥát-i-af’adiy-i-munírih), from the allusions of both....*” This image is often used by the Sufis to describe the human heart, as the essence of the soul. These are three examples, one from Rúmí and two from Ḥáfiz, respectively:

Recite entirely this ode from the tablet of the heart; regard  
not the tongue, for lips and tongue do not remain.  
[Rúmí, *Mystical Poems* 1:83, no. 96, v.8]

From the tablet of my heart and soul, Thy image, ever goeth  
not:  
From my recollection, that proudly moving cypress ever  
goeth not. [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 462, no. 258, v.1]

On my heart’s tablet is naught save the (straight) alif of the  
Friend’s stature:  
What may I do? Me, recollection of other letter the teacher  
(the murshid) gave not. [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 703, no. 416, v.8]

Bahá'u'lláh Himself sometimes uses this image in other Writings. For example He writes: “*It behoveth every man to blot out the trace of every idle word from the tablet of his heart, and to gaze, with an open and unbiased mind, on the signs of His Revelation, the proofs of His Mission, and the tokens of His glory*” [GWB 11, sec.7, Súriy-i-Qamís]. He also writes: “*... O my brother, when a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must ... wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory*” [KI 192-3, ¶213]. This image reminds us of the Aristotelian “tabula rasa” the *unscribed tablet* [see Aristotle, *De Anima* [On the soul], 3:4, 430-31]. The soul seems described as a tablet upon which the beauteous features of the Face of the Lord can be drawn through the combined efforts of pure love and a purified intellect.

## ***Dil-bar*, the heart-ravisher**

The image of the heart-ravisher or stealer of hearts (*dil-bar*), “Heart-ravishing; a lovely woman, a sweetheart” [Steingass 531], is very common in Persian mystical poetry. Javad Nurbakhsh (1926-2008), a Sufi master who published a 16 volume encyclopedia entitled *Sufi Symbolism*, explains that this locution, which he translates “heart-ravisher,” “is said to represent the attribute of contraction engendered in the heart through ‘anguish’ (*anduh*) and tribulation (*meḥnat*)” [2:40]. Ḥāfīz uses this image in the following distich:

If of the Sulṭán, I formed expectation, a fault it was:  
 If of the Heart-Ravisher (*dil-bar*), I sought fidelity,  
 tyranny he made. [*Díván* 242, no. 116, v.6; *Díván*  
 136, “Ghazalyát,” no. 130, v.5]

This image also is included in the verse of Saná’í that Bahá’u’lláh quotes in this Tablet:

*Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts*  
*(dil-bar),*  
*Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty’s rose.*  
 [SV 60]

The stealer of hearts describes the cruelty of the Beloved, Who denies Himself to the absolute love of the lover, abandoning him to his pains in the desert of loneliness and remoteness. It is an allusion to God’s unknowability. In the Bahá’í Writings this *topos* is less important, because Bahá’u’lláh has come to bring a glad tidings:

*Behold how the manifold grace of God, which is being*  
*showered from the clouds of Divine glory, hath, in this day,*  
*encompassed the world. For whereas in days past every*  
*lover besought and searched after his Beloved, it is the*  
*Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers and is*  
*inviting them to attain His presence. Take heed lest ye*  
*forfeit so precious a favor; beware lest ye belittle so*  
*remarkable a token of His grace.* [GWB 319, sec. CLI, Lawḥ-i-  
 ‘Áshiq va Ma‘shúq]

The day of sadness for lovers are ended, a new age of joy has begun.

## The Beauty's rose

This image also belongs to Saná'í's verses quoted by Bahá'u'lláh. In the Sufi world the rose (*gul*) "symbolizes the result of the knowledge that appears in the heart of the gnostic" (Nurbakhsh 4:39). It may also be interpreted as "the supreme manifestation of Divine beauty or the symbol of the beloved cheek" [Schimmel, *Deciphering* 26]. Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) explains: "in the Islamic tradition, as elsewhere, the rose has pride of place. The Prophet kissed the rose and placed it on his eyes, for 'the red rose is part of God's glory, *kibriya*'. On the other hand, legend claims that the rose grew out of the drops of perspiration which fell from the Prophet's body during his nightly journey — therefore it carries his sweet fragrance" [*Deciphering* 20].

In the Bahá'í collective imagination the rose has come to be especially associated with the story of Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration in the Garden of Ridván in Baghdad, as described by Nabíl. A famous passage by Bahá'u'lláh turns around the images of the rose-garden and the flower par excellence, the rose: "*In the Rose Garden of changeless splendor a Flower hath begun to bloom, compared to which every other flower is but a thorn, and before the brightness of Whose glory the very essence of beauty must pale and wither*" [GWB 320-1, sec. 151, ¶3, Lawḥ-i-‘Áshiq va Ma‘shúq].

## Two qiblas

The above mentioned quotation by Saná'í goes on saying: "One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two qiblas." The Qiblih is "The 'Point of Adoration,' that is, the point to which the worshipper should turn when offering obligatory prayer, is called the Qiblih" ["Preface and Notes" 168n7] and Bahá'u'lláh has decreed: "*The Qiblih is indeed He Whom God will make manifest; whenever He moveth, it moveth, until He shall come to rest*" [KA 68, ¶137]. The poetical image is very clear: the qiblih "symbolizes the focus of the attention of the heart" [Nurbakhsh 3:101] and the heart cannot at the same time turn towards two goals. Either he loves the Beloved or he walks away from Him. The Gospel also states: "*No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to*

*the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon*" [Luke 16:13, KJB].

## The veils

Bahá'u'lláh quotes an hemistich by Ḥáfiz which says: "Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise." The Sufis think that while living on this earthly world each person is separated from the Reality hidden behind everything by many obstacles, which they call "veils:" the veil of the flesh, the veil of passion, the veil of ignorance, the veil of heedlessness, the veil of human learning, the veil of attachment to the glories of the world, the veil of self, etcetera. This image often recurs in the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'u'lláh mentions the "*veils of glory*" [KI 164, ¶175], the "*veils of learning*" [KI 214, ¶237], the "*veil of self*" [GWB 316, sec. 147, Lawḥ-i-Salmán] "*the veils of heedlessness*" [GWB 322, sec. 152, Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad bi Fársí], *the veils of desire* [SLH 31, sec. 1, ¶60. Súriy-i-Haykal], "*veils of light*" [TB 143, Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat], etcetera. 'Abdu'l-Bahá classifies the veils as follows:

*Know thou, verily, there are many veils in which the Truth is enveloped: gloomy veils; then delicate and transparent veils; then the envelopment of Light, the sight of which dazzles the eyes, as doth the sun which is enveloped only in its own light and, as we look at it, the sight is blinded and eyes are dazzled.* [TAB1 71-2]

## Joseph and Jacob

Bahá'u'lláh writes: "*Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay, undoubtedly he would have not necessitated the Egyptian shirt, or an announcer bringing him the glad tiding, or an ambassador speaking to him.*" Joseph, who is presented in the Qur'án not only as a judicious, wise and pious man but also as a youth of such extraordinary beauty as to appear as "*a noble angel*" [12:31], is considered to be the symbol of absolute Beauty. Jacob is viewed as the human soul in search of that Beauty and turned blind because of the many tears it has shed in its remoteness from its Beloved.



## The Egyptian shirt

This allusion to the Egyptian shirt may also be found in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “*Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks*” [KA 20, ¶4]. This verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is commented as follows:

This is an allusion to the story of Joseph in the Qur’án and the Old Testament, in which Joseph’s garment, brought by his brothers to Jacob, their father, enabled Jacob to identify his beloved long-lost son. The metaphor of the fragrant “garment” is frequently used in the Bahá’í Writings to refer to the recognition of the Manifestation of God and His Revelation. [“Preface and Notes” 165 n1]

## The Egypt of fidelity

Bahá’u’lláh mentions “*the Egypt of fidelity (Miṣr-i-vafá)*.” This image also belongs to the overall image of the story of Joseph. Interestingly, when Sufi poets refer to the story of Moses, Egypt, the reign of Pharaoh, the great oppressor of Moses and the Jews, mostly denotes materialism, the prison of the self and passions. This demonstrate the great fluidity of mystic symbolism, which defies the strict rules of the human mind.

## The north of the Spirit (*shimál-i-rúh*)

Bahá’u’lláh writes: “*On the contrary, he would have perceived the pure and sanctified breezes from the north (shimál) of the Spirit and he would have dwelt in perfect union with the Beloved.*” The word *shimál* means both north and left. But when it means “left” it has a negative connotation, as in Koran 56:9, where it denotes the damned souls, as opposed to the right denoting the blessed ones. In this case the locution *shimál-i-rúh* is mentioned, that could be rendered as “the north of the Spirit.” The French Iranist Henry Corbin (1903-1978) writes about *shimál* as north what follows:

Now one of the *leitmotiv* of Iranian Sufi literature is the “Quest for the Orient,” but this is a Quest for an Orient

which, as we are forewarned (if we do not already realize), is not – and cannot be – situated on our geographical maps. This Orient is not comprised in any of the seven *climes* (*keshvar*); it is in fact the *eighth* clime. And the direction in which we must seek this “eighth clime” is not on the horizontal but on the vertical. This suprasensory, mystical Orient, the place of the Origin and of the Return, object of the eternal Quest, is at the heavenly pole; it is the Pole, at the extreme north, so far off that it is the threshold of the dimension “beyond.” That is why it is only revealed to a definite mode of presence in the world, and can be revealed only through this mode of presence. There are other modes to which it will never be revealed. It is precisely this mode of presence that characterizes the mode of being of the Sufi, but also, through his person, the mode of being of the entire spiritual family to which Sufism – and especially Iranian Sufism – belongs. The *Orient* sought by the mystic, the Orient that cannot be located on our maps, is in the direction of the *north*, beyond the north. Only an ascensional progress can lead toward this cosmic north chosen as a point of orientation. [*Man of Light* 2]

Corbin also points out that the north is “on the one hand... the *situs* of the angel Sraoshah (who thus would correspond to the angel Seraphiel); on the other hand this is the qualification given in Sufism to the great shaykh of a period (even the shaykh of a Sufi community, a *tarīqat*, insofar as the latter is taken as the homologue of a microcosm) and for this reason is considered in Shí’ite Sufism as representing the hidden Imám” (ibid. 56). Ḥáfīz uses this metaphor in the two following verses:

O (cool) breeze of the north! the breeze of good news, thou art,  
That, us, at union’s time, reacheth. [*Díván* 621, no. 360, v.1]

The breeze of love’s perfume, I perceived; and, expectant  
of the flashing of the lightning of union, became:

O (cool) breeze of the north! come: for, for the perfume of  
thy body, I die! [*Díván* 626, no.364, v.1]

## The joy of the Divine Presence (*Shawq-i-Iqá*)

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay...] he would have tasted the joy of the Divine Presence and the flavor of eternity.” Bahá'u'lláh Himself explains the spiritual meaning of the concept of the Divine Presence in the Kitáb-i-Íqán: “by ‘attainment unto the divine Presence’ is meant attainment unto the presence of His Beauty in the person of His Manifestation” [KI 170, ¶182].

## The eternal life

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay...] he would have obtained the eternal life...” This concept also is explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán: “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” [KI 142, ¶151].

## Resurrection

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay...] he would have entered into the immortal Paradise after the spiritual resurrection.” Resurrection can be seen in two different perspectives, personal and eschatological. As to the personal perspective, the key to read this metaphor is in the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

*Such things have come to pass in the days of every Manifestation of God. Even as Jesus said: “Ye must be born again” [1 John 3:7]. Again He saith: “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” [2 John 3:5-6]. The purport of these words is that whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the*

*Manifestation of Holiness, he verily is of those that have attained unto "life" and "resurrection" and have entered into the "paradise" of the love of God. And whosoever is not of them, is condemned to "death" and "deprivation," to the "fire" of unbelief, and to the "wrath" of God. In all the scriptures, the books and chronicles, the sentence of death, of fire, of blindness, of want of understanding and hearing, hath been pronounced against those whose lips have tasted not the ethereal cup of true knowledge, and whose hearts have been deprived of the grace of the holy Spirit in their day. Even as it hath been previously recorded: "Hearts have they with which they understand not." [Koran 7:178]. [KI 118-9, ¶125]*

In this case it seems that resurrection is intended in its personal perspective.

**"Everything will perish except His own Face (*kullu shay'in hálíka illa vajhahu*)"** [28:88, Yusuf Ali]

Yusuf Ali comments upon this verse as follows: "This sums up the lesson of the whole Surah. The only Eternal Reality is Allah. His 'Face' or Self, Personality or Being is what we should seek, knowing that it is the only enduring thing of which we can have any conception. The whole phenomenal world is subject to flux and change and will pass away, but He will endure forever" [*The Holy Quran* 1027 n3421]. This Koranic verse appears in a verse by Rúmi in the following context:

I died to the inorganic state and became endowed with  
growth, and (then) I died to (vegetable) growth and  
attained to the animal.

I died from animality and became Adam (man): why, then,  
should I fear? When have I become less by dying?

At the next remove I shall die to man, that I may soar and  
lift up my head amongst the angels;

And I must escape even from (the state of) the angel:  
*everything is perishing except His Face.*

Once more I shall be sacrificed and die to the angel: I shall  
become that which enters not into the imagination.

Then I shall become non-existence: non-existence saith to me, (in tones loud) as an organ, *Verily, unto Him shall we return.*

Know death to be (the thing signified by) what the (Mohammedan) community are agreed upon, namely, that the Water of Life is hidden in the (Land of) Darkness.

Grow from this river-bank, like the water-lily, greedy and craving for death as the sufferer from dropsy.

The water is death to him, and (yet) he is seeking the water and drinking it — and God best knoweth the right course. [*Mathnaví* 3:3901-9]

Human beings are here described in their ascending progress from the mineral world to the station of the angles, and then to their annihilation in their return to God.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a Tablet in which He explained several meanings of the word “face (*vajh*)”:

*The word “face” (vajh) hath many meanings, among which there is submissiveness to the Will of God (riḍá), as God, exalted be He, says: “Seeking His Face” [Koran 6:52], and also: “We feed you for the sake of God alone” [Koran 76:9], and moreover His good-pleasure (riḍá). And the face also means the Essence (dhát). God, exalted be He, says: “Everything ... will perish except His own Face” [Koran 28:88]. And the face (vajh) also means the unveiling (jilwat). God, exalted be He, says: “whithersoever ye turn, there is the Presence of God” [Koran 2:115]. And the face (vajh) hath various interpretations and allusions, beside what hath been said. However, due to lack of time, it hath been chosen not to expatiate the subject. On the ground of all this, submission (taslím) of the face is one thing of the special virtues of the righteous and of the greatest gifts of the free. Whosoever is so aided is graciously favored with absolute faith in the highest level of certitude and assurance. [Makátíb 1:396, provisional translation by the authors]*

## Uways and the camel

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*One ought to perceive the perfume of the Beloved from Uways' camel hair. As the Mathnaví's author says:*

*The perfume of the Beloved exaleth from the camel hair.*

*This camel is of the herd of that pearl who is Lord Uways.*

Uwaysu'l-Qaraní is “a legendary or semi-legendary younger contemporary of Muḥammad said to have been killed at the battle of Šiffín in 37/657, fighting on the side of ‘Alí ... [The legend says that] Muḥammad and Uways corresponded by telepathy” [Bosworth, “Uways al-Qaraní”]. The morning breeze, according to the Tradition, brought to Muhammad the scent of the holiness of Uways al-Qaraní who lived in Yemen.

According to Nurbakhsh, the camel “is said to represent humanity (*ensániyat*)” [4:153].

## Breezes, scents and the Yemen

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*However, the musky fragrance of the Beloved and the breezes of the Merciful have ceased to waft from the Yemen of the Friend.*” In the Sufi language breezes and winds have positive connotations. The breeze, “*nasím*,” is often described as a messenger of love, because at dawn it wafts the scent of the rose, the traditional metaphor of the Beloved, or the musk scent of the Friend. Breezes and winds are often associated with the idea of scent, a concept which has many connotations in the Sufi world. Among them, as in the Western world, a spiritual person may be described as a person in the odor of sanctity. In this case the Tabled alludes to the above mentioned legend of Uways. Yemen, the southern region of the Arabic Peninsula, is here mentioned because it was the place where Uways lived.

## The pearl and the shell

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*Yeah, the casket of the white pearl (lú-lú-i-baydá) is concealed within the sea shell (şadaf), inasmuch as the untouched pearl, which bestows perfect power upon the inner powers of the heart and adds the light of vision to intelligence, is more acceptable and agreeable.*” According to Nurbakhsh the symbol of the pearl refers to the perfect Man. Ebn ‘Arabi refers to it as the “white pearl” [4:240]. As to the shell, according to Nurbakhsh “*it is said to symbolize the form of the multiplicity of the existential names and Attribute*” [4:152]. As to the untouched pearls, they are reminiscent of the Koranic image of the *Hurís*, that are “*large-eyed ones with modest refraining glances, fair like the sheltered egg*” [37:48-9, Rodwell], girls “*with large dark eyes*” [44:54, Rodwell], beautiful “*like jacinths and pearls*” [55:58, Rodwell], “*whom no man nor spirit hath touched before*” [55:56, Rodwell], given as brides to the believers in the Heaven’s gardens of delight. Other meanings of this metaphor are explained in the following words by Bahá'u'lláh: “*How many the húrís of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom! None hath yet approached them; – húrís, ‘whom no man nor spirit hath touched before’*” [KI 70-1, ¶78].

## The arm of the Beloved

In the language of the Sufis the arm, *bázú*, “represents the Divine Will (*masheyat*)” [Nurbakhsh 1:14]. The image is commonly used in Persian mystical poems to describe strength and power. For example Háfiẓ writes:

O sky! Away from the purpose of king Manşúr,<sup>4</sup> thy face  
 turn not  
 The keenness of his sword, behold: the power of his  
 arm, behold. [*Díván* 761, no. 456, v.8]

Bahá'u'lláh uses this image in this Tablet when He says: “*Imagine what will the power of the Friend’s arm do?*”

## The Phoenix of the West and the city of the soul

Bahá'u'lláh writes: *“O dear one, thy Companion sayeth that one ought to be purified from the defilement of imitation, so that the Phoenix of the West may emerge from the Orient of the Beloved and wing its flight into the sanctified atmosphere of the Spirit, that is the city of the soul.”* According to Nurbakhsh the Phoenix of the West “is said to represent the Perfect Man, the wayfarer who is in Union, and one who has gnosis of the Divine Essence” [4:148]. In this case we also have the symbolism of the two opposed directions of the West and the East. The West denotes occultation and the East theophany.

As to “the city of the soul (*madíniy-i-ján*),” this locution is reminiscent of a sentence in the Seven Valleys, which says: *“to this evanescent One of the mystic ocean, this station is the first gate of the heart’s citadel, that is, man’s first entrance to the city of the heart”* [SV 41].

## The desert of the intellect and the “swoon”

Bahá'u'lláh writes: *“The lovers of the desert of the intellect have swooned away because of the call from the Unseen.”* Nurbakhsh gives us an interesting background to understand the symbol of the desert:

We know that to reach Mecca, one must pass through cities and cross the desert. Sháh Ne‘matollah,<sup>5</sup> in the following passage, has used the images of “city” and “desert” to symbolize the *nafs* and its inclinations along the way of the “Pilgrimage” to Reality:

“Love of women, property, status, food and drink, or whatever tempts the *nafs*, stands like cities along the way of the ‘Pilgrimage’ to Reality. Once these are passed, the blood-thirsty desert lies ahead and must be traversed for the sake of austerity, the caravan chief being the Prophet. If one is remiss in following him, one falls behind, and is destroyed by the *nafs*, which is like a desert thief.” [3:112]



As to the “swoon,” the Persian locution “*madhúsh shudand*” corresponds with the Arabic word “*ṣá’iq<sup>an</sup>*.” Therefore this sentence seems to be a reference to the story of Moses, and specifically to Moses’s swoon when God showed Himself to Him on Mount Sinai described in the Koran as follows: “*And when God manifested Himself to the mountain he turned it to dust! and Moses fell in a swoon (ṣá’iq<sup>an</sup>)*” [Koran 7:139]. It is the annihilation of the human qualities of the seeker in front of the Manifestation of God. Similar ideas are explained by Bahá’u’lláh in the Four Valleys when He quotes this verse by Saná’i:

*Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee?  
Teach it the science of the love of God!* [SV 52]

In other words, the mind can be deceitful. Only a mind that has been educated and thus transformed through its perusal and internalization of Scripture is a reliable source of knowledge.

### **The moldering bones (‘*aẓm-i-ramím*)**

Bahá’u’lláh writes. “*Such were the joy and the ecstasy and the delight and the happiness, that the breath of the Holy Spirit hath wafted from the moldering bones....*” This image comes from the Koran, which says. “*Who ... shall give life to bones when they are rotten?*” [36:78, Rodwell]. Bahá’u’lláh draws from this verse an attribute of God the “*Fashioner of mouldering bones*” [SLH 53, sec. 1, ¶118, Súriy-i-Haykal], and also “*God, Who fashioneth the crumbling and rotten bones*” [GWB 243, sec. 115, Lawḥ-i-Dhabíh].

### **‘Izrá’íl, Gabriel (*Rúḥu’l-Amín*), and Isráfíl**

Interestingly in the last part of the Tablet three angels are directly or indirectly mentioned: ‘Izrá’íl, the angel of death, Gabriel, the angel of revelation, and Isráfíl, the angel of life.

As to ‘Izrá’íl, of the one who is “purified from the defilement of imitation” Bahá’u’lláh says: “*‘Izrá’íl, the angel of death, will stand as a servant at His door, ready to serve Him.*” The Koran says: “*Say: The angel of death, who is charged with you, shall cause you to die; then shall he be returned to your Lord*” (32:11). The name of this

angel is, according to tradition, ‘Izrá’íl or Azrá’íl (the servant of the Highest), in English Azrael. He may be compared to Ezrael, the angel of divine wrath of the Christian apocrypha. Rúmí defines him as “tyrannous and enraged” [*Mathnaví* 5:1571]. The tradition describes Izrá’íl as an enormous angel who appears in a different shape to believers and unbelievers. He appears to a dying believer as a pleasant and reassuring vision, but to an infidel as the most terrifying figure.

As to Gabriel, Bahá’u’lláh writes. “*Such were the joy and the ecstasy and the delight and the happiness, that the breath of the Holy Spirit hath wafted from the moldering bones and the Spirit of Faith hath winged its flight on the wings of success.*” Shoghi Effendi translates the locution *Rúḥu’l-Amín* [literally, the Trusted Spirit] “Gabriel” [GWB 103, sec. 50], and “*Spirit of God*” [KI 114, ¶121]. Rúmí Writes: “Since the Name of Ahmad became (to the Christians) an impregnable fortress, what then must be the Essence of that trusted Spirit?” [1:738]. According to Nurbakhsh “The trusted Spirit normally refers to Gabriel, although occasionally in Rumi’s *Mathnaví* it may represent the Moḥammadan Spirit” [9:100].

As to Isráfíl, Bahá’u’lláh writes: “*The Isráfíl of life wondereth with which melody he could wake up these companions and beseecheth that haply he may share their swoon (bí-húshī).*” Israfíl, whose etymology could be the same as Seraphim, corresponds to the English Seraphiel. In the Muslim tradition he is the angel who in the Day of Judgement will awake the dead “calling” them with his trumpet. The Qur’án [54:6-8] calls him “the summoner (*dá’í*)”. Rúmí describes him as the “life of the body,” whereas he describes Gabriel as the “life of the inspired spirit” [*Mathnaví* 5:1566, 1565]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has reportedly said that the two angels ‘Izrá’íl and Isráfíl are symbols:

*As by the will of God the power of composition exists, so, also by will of God the power of decomposition exists.*

*These two are expressed in scripture by “Isráfíl” the angel who gives life to men, and the Angel of Death who takes it away. The first is the power of composition or attraction, the other the power of decomposition. They are not angels. [qtd. in Goodall and Goodall Cooper 43-4]*

***and God best knoweth the right course***

(w'alláhua'lambi's-şawáb)

This statement is frequently used by Rûmî in his *Mathnavî*. It comes from a Koranic verse which says: “*The Day that the Spirit and the angels will stand forth in ranks, none shall speak except any who is permitted by (Allah) Most Gracious, and he will say what is right (aş-şawában)*” [78:38, Yusuf Ali].

***verily, unto Him shall we return*** [Rûmî, *Mathnavî* 3:3906, Koran 2:156]

This Koranic verse is often used in the Bahá'í Writings, as for example the Seven Valleys, The Four Valleys, and Javáhiru'l-Asrár. It is an allusion to the so called “second birth,” that is, that process whereby the human soul gradually detaches itself from the lower world, and actualizes its God-given spiritual attributes.

## **The contents of the Tablet**

It is not certainly easy to summarize the contents of a Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. He quotes an Islamic tradition which says: “*We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain*” [KI 255, ¶283]. And thus we will be satisfied with a very short review of this inspiring Text.

Bahá'u'lláh wishes that the most cherished desires of His addressee may be fulfilled. However, He suggests that the highest aspiration of a human heart, that is, the attainment unto His Holy Presence, will be fulfilled, only if the soul will forget anything else but its Lord. This overall concept is conveyed, in a language enriched by poetical images and quotations, through six different explanations.

First. The first quotation — “Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand crying, ‘I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my desire’” [Rûmî, *Mystical Poems* 1:46, no. 51, v.14] — is in itself, as it often is the case with mystic writings, an epitome of the whole Tablet. The shaykh is tired to meet with people who may be compared to “beast and devil,” he wants to finally find a real human being. And Bahá'u'lláh wrote later in a Tablet: “*Lofty is the station of man, were*

*he to hold fast to righteousness and truth and to remain firm and steadfast in the Cause. In the eyes of the All-Merciful a true man appeareth even as a firmament; its sun and moon are his sight and hearing, and his shining and resplendent character its stars. His is the loftiest station, and his influence educateth the world of being*” [TB 219, Kitáb-i-Ahd]. Therefore the whole Tablet is about the quest for a man who has attained unto his divinely appointed lofty station.

Second. The second quotation emphasizes the importance of detachment in two different perspectives:

Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts,  
 Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty’s rose [SV 60].  
 With that rose bud no one sleeps with a shirt.  
 One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two  
 qiblas,  
 Either one will please the Beloved, or will consent to  
 one’s passions. [Saná’i, *Díván* [Furúzánfar] 253]

The first verse recommends detachment through the language of erotic-mystical poetry: the closest intimacy with the Beloved requires that the lover takes off even his shirt. Soon after the Tablet suggests that the most important detachment is that from oneself, here described as a veil: “Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise” [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 534, 308:9]. The second verse uses the language of the ascetic. The ascetic cannot have two qiblihs. Nurbakhsh explains that the qiblih “symbolizes the focus of attention of the heart” [3:101]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said on the subject of the attachment of the heart:

*God has given man a heart and the heart must have some attachment. We have proved that nothing is completely worthy of our heart’s devotion save reality, for all else is destined to perish. Therefore the heart is never at rest and never finds real joy and happiness until it attaches itself to the eternal. How foolish the bird that builds its nest in a tree that may perish when it could build its nest in an ever-verdant garden of paradise.*

*Man must attach himself to an infinite reality, so that his glory, his joy, and his progress may be infinite. Only the spirit is real; everything else is as shadow. [ADP 133]*

Third. Later on the Tablet explains that if Jacob would have been wholly purified from his attachment to the world, he would have found Joseph even without the assistance of his shirt. It is a reference to the story of Joseph, that has been explained above [Koran 12:93-96].

Fourth. The Tablet explains that only through detachment the meaning of the Koranic verse 28:88, “*Everything will perish except His own Face,*” will become apparent. In other words, only a detached person is able to look at the world “*with the eye of God*” [SV 17] and thus to behold “*the brilliant rays of the divine sun shining from the dawning-point of Essence alike on all created things, and the lights of singleness reflected over all creation*” [ibid.].

Fifth. A detached person recognizes the Perfect Man even in the smell of the hair of the camel of Uwaysu'l-Qaraní. The Uways of the legend worked as the guardian of the camels of his tribe and wore a rough cloak made of camel hair [see Attár, *Tadhkiratu'l-Awlya*, Dhikr 2]. He was an ascetic and lived in loneliness, detached from all the things of the world. He was so poor and destitute, that no one would have thought him to be a true saint. This reference to Uways is followed by a passage, that is not easily comprehensible. It could allude to the fact that the time was not yet ripe for Bahá'u'lláh to announce His Manifestation.

Sixth. Only a detached seeker will see the Phoenix winging its flight and taking its place in the city of the soul. The Phoenix is the symbol of the Manifestation of God. The city of the soul is the symbol of the human heart. This image is reminiscent of one of the images of the Seven Valleys:

*Whensoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: “A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth....” For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the*

*dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will.* [SV 22]

In both cases the Manifestation of God takes His place in a human heart that approaches Him in a detached attitude of prayer and adoration.

The Tablet ends with a difficult passage, which could allude to Bahá'u'lláh's high station, here described as that of One to Whom angels promptly render service.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A verse very similar to this may be found in a ghazal by Muṣlihu'd-Dín Sa'dí (ca. 1184–1291). See Rafati, *Má'akhidh* 4:81-4. It says: “Shíráz will be thrown into a tumult by Thine upsetting and joyous gaze | I fear lest this turmoil may inflame Shíráz (*Shírázpur-ghawgháshud-ast az fitniy-i-chashm-i-khushat* | *tars-am kiháshúbí 'ajab bar ham zanad Shíráz-rá*).”
- <sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Rafati, *Yádnámih* 296, provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghani. The authors thank Mr. Ghaemmaghani for having given his permission to use it in this paper.
- <sup>3</sup> We did not find this *ghazal* in the collections of Rúmí's *ghazals* recorded on the Internet.
- <sup>4</sup> A Muzaffarid king of Iran, who reigned between ca. 1391 and ca. 1393.
- <sup>5</sup> Sháh Ni'matulláh Valí (1330-1431) was a Sufi master and poet.



## A Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh<sup>1</sup>

provisional translation by Julio Savi and Faezeh  
Mardani

Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand  
crying, "I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my  
desire."<sup>2</sup>

O loving friend, I render thanks unto God that thou art, on the whole, in good health, and that the stainless mirror of thine heart telleth of the tokens and ecstasies of thy soul. May, God willing, thine heart's purpose be attained and thy soul's wish be fulfilled, although it is preferred that we purify this luminous tablet, which is among the pages of illuminated breasts, from the allusions of both and that we hasten naked unto the wide plain of the spirit, as it was said by the divine sage:

Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts,  
Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty's rose. [FV 60]  
One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two qiblas,  
Either one will please the Beloved, or will consent to one's  
passions.<sup>3</sup>

Not only the shirt but being itself becometh a veil, and otherness a curtain. The scholar of Shíráz hath said: "Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise."<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay, undoubtedly he would have not necessitated the Egyptian shirt, or an announcer bringing him the glad tiding, or an ambassador speaking to him. On the contrary, he would have perceived the pure and sanctified breezes from the north of the Spirit and he would have dwelt in perfect union with the Beloved.

He would have tasted the joy of the Divine Presence and the ecstasy of the flavor of subsistence from the fount of purity, and he would have obtained the eternal life and everlasting perpetuity, and he would have entered into the immortal Paradise after the spiritual resurrection. He would have seen a thousand Josephs circling in adoration without any voice of complaint and would have received the sweetness of the Egypt of fidelity from the City of the court of the Incomparable.

Yea, as long as the impurities of the world of multiplicity, whose only outcome is death, will not be destroyed and annihilated, the eternal countenance of His Face will not come out unconcealed from the veils, and the meaning of "Everything will perish except His own Face"<sup>5</sup> will not become manifest from the lucid brow. What else can I write? One ought to perceive the perfume of the Beloved from Uways' camel hair. As the *Mathnaví's* author says:

The perfume of the Beloved exaleth from the camel hair.

This camel is of the herd of that pearl who is Lord Uways.

However, the musky fragrance of the Beloved and the breezes of the Merciful have ceased to waft from the Yemen of the Friend.

Yea, the casket of the white pearl is concealed within the sea shell, inasmuch as the untouched pearl, which bestows perfect power upon the inner powers of the heart and adds the light of vision to intelligence, is more acceptable and agreeable. May its concealment be conducive to revelation, and its occultation be followed by an unveiling, or a child clarify this symbolic language, or a power break this seal.

When seeds are hidden in the earth, their inward secret  
becomes the verdure of the garden.<sup>6</sup>

Imagine what will the power of the Friend's arm do?

O dear one, thy Companion sayeth that one ought to be purified from the defilement of imitation, so that the Phoenix of the West may emerge from the Orient of the Beloved and wing its flight into the sanctified atmosphere of the Spirit, that is the city of the soul.

I swear by God! Even if the armies of death would ride at full gallop, they will not catch up with the dust lifted by this Horseman, and 'Isrá'íl, the angel of death, will stand as a servant at His door, ready to serve Him, and will implore favors from whoever is bound towards His sanctuary, that haply he may be accepted in the court of glory, and may circle in adoration in those lofty precincts, which are loftier than a shining star, and he may perceive.

Praise be to God! The breeze of love hath wafted and hath perfumed the assembly of intimacy. The Spirit hath intoned a new melody. The lovers of the desert of the intellect have swooned away because of the call from the Unseen. Such were the joy and the ecstasy and the delight and the happiness, that the breath of the Holy Spirit hath wafted from the moldering bones and Gabriel hath winged its flight on the wings of success. The Isráfil of life wondereth with which melody he could wake up these companions and beseecheth that haply he may share their swoon.

I will cease (from speech): the Sweetheart has begun to speak,  
be (all) ear — *and God best knoweth the right course.*<sup>7</sup>

In this day life hath come out of my body, It sayeth to me:  
*verily, unto Him shall we return.*<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ráfatí, *Má'akhidh* 3281-2. See also *Majmu'ih* 36:374-6.

<sup>2</sup> Rúmí, *Mystical Poems* 1:46, no. 51, v.14.

<sup>3</sup> Saná'í, *Díván* (Furúzánfar) 253.

<sup>4</sup> Háfiz, *Díván* 534, 308:9.

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<sup>5</sup> Koran 28:88, Yusuf Ali.

<sup>6</sup> Rûmî, *Mathnavî* 1:177.

<sup>7</sup> Rûmî, *Mathnavî* 3:3844.

<sup>8</sup> Rûmî, *Mathnavî* 3:3906, Koran 2:156.

# Ancient Poems as Means of Revelation, in an Early Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

## Abstract

This paper offers a provisional translation of a Persian Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Iraqi period [above]. The Tablet is rich in quotations from ancient Iranian poets. Our paper examines the importance of poetry in the history of the Faith and in its Writings. It analyzes the quoted poems and the many poetical metaphors used in the Tablet. It ends with a short commentary on the contents of the Tablet: absolute detachment is a fundamental prerequisite for attaining “unto the divine Presence.”

The authors learned about this Tablet by Bahá'u'lláh through a publication by Vahid Rafati, *Má'akhidh* 3:281-2. This book is part of a set of four Persian volumes, commendably published by Rafati, in which he lists one by one all verses quoted by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Their Writings and examines them in their contexts. This Tablet, wholly written in Persian, is also published in *Majmú'iy-i-Āthár-Qalam-i-A'lá* 36:374-6. According to Rafati it was revealed in Baghdad. The Iranian Bahá'í scholar Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil *Mázandarání* (ca. 1880-1957) states that it was revealed in Kurdistan (*Asráru'l-Āthár* 5:15). Its mystical subject is certainly typical of the Writings composed by Bahá'u'lláh in that period.

We have been especially impressed by this Tablet, not only because of its contents, that emphasizes absolute detachment as an

indispensable prerequisite for the “*attainment unto the Divine Presence*” [KI 141, ¶149], but also because in the short space of two pages offers six quotations of verses by three different poets. And this has appeared to us as a sign of the importance that Bahá’u’lláh ascribed to poetry.

## Poetry in the history of the Faith and in the Writings

Nabíl narrates that the Báb told him about a verse by Ḥáfiz which says: “O zephyr, shouldst thou pass by the banks of the Araxes, implant a kiss on the earth of that valley and make fragrant thy breath. Hail, a thousand times hail, to thee, O abode of Salma! How dear is the voice of thy camel-drivers, how sweet the jingling of thy bells!” [see *Díván* 537, no. 310, vv.1-2]:

It is the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit that causes words such as these to stream from the tongue of poets, the significance of which they themselves are oftentimes unable to apprehend. The following verse is also divinely inspired: ‘*Shíráz* will be thrown into a tumult; a Youth of sugar-tongue will appear. I fear lest the breath of His mouth should agitate and upset *Baghdád*.’<sup>1</sup> The mystery enshrined within this verse is now concealed; it will be revealed in the year after Him.” The Báb subsequently quoted this well-known tradition: “Treasures lie hidden beneath the throne of God; the key to those treasures is the tongue of poets. [DB 258-9]

Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá were both refined poets. One of “the first fruits of ... [Bahá’u’lláh’s] Divine Pen” that arrived into our hands is a Persian poem entitled *Rashḥ-i-‘Amá*, that was “revealed in *Tīhrán*” [GPB 121]. And *Rashḥ-i-‘Amá* is just one among many Persian and Arabic poems revealed by Bahá’u’lláh. Bahá’u’lláh praised Mírzá Maqṣúd, one of the believers who lived in Damascus and Jerusalem, because of a number of poems he sent to him, and described those poems as being “*like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love ... [he cherished] for God and His chosen ones ... [were] reflected*” [TB 175, Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd]. He wrote about poetry in general:

*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 in causing your tongues to unlock treasures and to reveal wisdom and mysteries. Let God be your fear 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 your Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised.* [provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami]<sup>2</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself wrote various poems both in Persian and Turkish. He pointed out the special value of words in poetry when He said: “*Poetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition*” [CC 2:78]. And reportedly said: “*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. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God*” [CH 167]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed His admiration for those among His fellows-prisoners who, like Nabíl-i-Zarandí, Darvish Šidq-‘Alí, Áqá Muhammad-Ibráhím, Ustad ‘Alí-Akbar and Jináb-i-Muníb [MF 32-6, 36-8, 81-2, 102-3, 145-7] had a fine poetical vein. He received poems from a number of Western Bahá’ís, which He often acknowledged with words of approval. To James Simpson, He wrote that his poems showed that he was “*ablaze with the burning fire of the love of God,*” that he had “*secured a share and portion from the bounty of the Spirit and ... purposed 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]. To Marie Watson He wrote that her poems were “*in the utmost sweetness and delicacy*” [Tablets to Bahais 307]. To Louise R. Waite, who was both a poetess and a musician, and to whom He conferred the title of Shahnáz – which is the name of a musical mode – He wrote that her poems were “*in the utmost eloquence and sweetness*” [Recent Tablets 318], “*wonderful*

*... fluent ... and ... most thrilling*” [Tablets revealed 198], “*sweet melodies in the Rose garden of the love of God*” [Tablets to Bahais 276], “*the cause of the gladness of their hearers*” [Recent Tablets 318], and that their “*vibration*” would “*forever, give pleasure to the ears of the children of the Kingdom*” [Tablets to Bahais 276]. He advised her, to strive “*in the composition of such pieces, so that at all times the river of pure poesy may flow from ... [her] tongue*” [Tablets revealed 198]. To other poets, whose names have not been identified, He wrote: “*I chanted thy poem. Its significance was beautiful, its composition eloquent and its words excellent. It was like the melody of the birds of holiness in the paradise of El-Abha ... Blessed art thou for uttering forth such an excellent poem and brilliant pearl*” [Tablets 1: 57]. And also: “*Verily, I read thy poem, which contained new significances and beautiful words. My heart was dilated by its eloquent sense*” [Tablets 1:58]. And moreover: “*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*” [Tablets 1:59]. And finally: “*Thy poetry was received. The context was elegant. The words were eloquent and the theme, the Manifest Light. Consequently, it was highly appreciated*” [Tablets 3:546]. He openly encouraged some of those poets. He wrote to one of them: “*Verily, these verses shall be sung in the divine meetings and in the assemblages of the spiritual in the course of ages and centuries to come, for thou hast uttered the praise of thy Lord and expressed significant meanings in eulogy of thy Lord, the Merciful, the Clement*” [Tablets 1:58]. And to another one: “*Endeavour 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*” [Tablets 1:59]. And finally: “*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*” [Tablets 3:669].

The earliest believers wrote poems and Shoghi Effendi describes “[t]he joyous feasts which these companions, despite their extremely modest earnings, continually offered in honor of their Beloved; the gatherings, lasting far into the night, in which they loudly celebrated, with prayers, poetry and song, the praises of the Báb, of Quddús and of Bahá’u’lláh” [GPB 135] in the late Baghdád period. No wonder then that both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew from the poetic Arabic and Persian legacy in the Writings which They revealed. Western



readers are especially familiar with the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, as works comprising many poetical quotations.

## Poems quoted in this Tablet

In this Tablet Bahá'u'lláh quotes Khájih Shamsu'd-Dín Muḥammad Ḥáfiz-i-Shirází (ca. 1318–1390), Mawláná Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmí (1207–1273) and Majdúd Saná'í (ca. 1045–ca. 1141). As to Ḥáfiz He quotes an hemistich from a ghazal, “a shorter, sonnet-like, lyrical form, observing mono-rhyme, the conventional meters and other prosodic rules” [Lewis, “Short Poem” 83]. As to Rúmí, He quotes a distich from a known ghazal at the beginning of the Tablet; and a distich of another ghazal, which has not yet been identified, in the context of the Tablet; He also quotes a distich from the Mathnaví in the context of, and two different distiches from the same Mathnaví, at the end of the Tablet. As to Saná'í, He quotes two distiches from a ghazal in the context of His Tablet.

The hemistich by Ḥáfiz says: “Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise.” The whole ghazal has been translated into English by Henri Wilberforce-Clark (1840–1905), an officer in the British India corps, first translator of the *Bústán* of Sa'dí (1257) and of the *Sikandar Námih* by Nízamí (ca. 1202) [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 534, no. 308]:

Ravished is my heart by one like a singing girl, clamour-  
exciter,

False of promise, slayer by nature, and colour (of deceit)-  
mixer.

A ransom for the rent garment of those of moon-face, be  
A thousand garments of piety and the khirka of austerity!  
In thanks for that that, in beauty, thou tookest from the  
(glorious) angel the ball of superiority,

The cup, demand; and on Adam's dust, a little water  
sprinkle.

Poor and shattered, to Thy court, I have come. A little pity,  
For, save attachment to Thee, attachment, mine is none.  
The slave, I am of that word that enkindleth the fire (of  
love):

Not (the slave of that word, that), in speech, dasheth cold  
water on the fierce fire (of love).

Come; for last night, to me, the invisible messenger spake,  
Saying: "In contentment's stage, be; from destiny, flee  
not."

Of thy own arm, be not proud; for in record it is:  
"In (by, under) the order of the king-maker a thousand  
arrayings."

In my coffin, put up the cup; so that, on the morning of  
rising,

I may, with wine, take from my heart the terror of the day  
up-rising and springing.

Between the lover and the Beloved, veil is none:

Hafiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise;  
and attain unto the Beloved.

It is a beautiful love poem, in which the "one like a singing girl" is the Beloved, with capital B. The poet sings His beauty, His cruelty, and his own dependence on Him. He concludes with a distich of high mysticism, whose second hemistich is quoted by Bahá'u'lláh, in which he mentions that he should be annihilated, so that he may be united with the Beloved. It is the usual concept of *faná*, which Bahá'u'lláh later on described in such Writings as the Seven Valleys, in the Valley of True Poverty and Utter Nothingness [SV 36-9], and Gems of Divine Mysteries, in the City of Absolute Nothingness [GDM 70-1, ¶101-4].

As to Rúmí, Bahá'u'lláh gives preference to him over other poets in this Tablet, as in other Writings, as for example the Seven Valleys. And thus He quotes Him five times, comprising at the beginning and at the end of the Tablet. His love towards Rúmí is demonstrated by an episode of His life, recorded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Master narrates in His description of the life of Ustád Ismá'íl, one of the companions who followed Bahá'u'lláh in the Holy Land, that:

*At one time, Bahá'u'lláh had written down an ode of Rúmí's for him, and had told him to turn his face toward the Báb and sing the words, set to a melody. And so as he wandered through the long dark nights, Ustád would sing these lines:*

*I am lost, O Love, possessed and dazed,  
 Love's fool am I, in all the earth.  
 They call me first among the crazed,  
 Though I once came first for wit and worth.  
 O Love, who sellest me this wine,  
 O Love, for whom I burn and bleed,  
 Love, for whom I cry and pine -  
 Thou the Piper, I the reed.  
 If Thou wishest me to live,  
 Through me blow Thy holy breath.  
 The touch of Jesus Thou wilt give  
 To me, who've lain an age in death.  
 Thou, both End and Origin.  
 Thou without and Thou within -  
 From every eye Thou hidest well,  
 And yet in every eye dost dwell. [MF 30-1]<sup>3</sup>*

The verse by Rûmî quoted at the opening of the Tablet reads as follows:

Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand  
 crying, 'I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my  
 desire.'

This ghazal has been entirely translated into English by both Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945), an expert in Sufism and especially in the work of Rûmî [*Selected Poems* 65-9, no. 16], and Arthur John Arberry (1905-1969), the well-known British orientalist [*Mystical Poems* 1:46, no. 51, v. 14]. It comprises 24 verses, and thus like many of Rûmî's ghazal is quite longer than usual ghazals, which according to the Italian Iranist Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988) comprise "generally not less than five and no more than twelve" ["Ghazal. ii. In Persian literature"]. The Bahá'í world knows its verse 20, "In one hand the wine-cup, in one hand the tresses of the Friend. Such a dance in the midst of the market-place is my desire!", because Shoghi Effendi adds this note to the *Dawn Breakers* [DB 620n1]:

The extraordinary heroism with which Sulaymán Khán bore these frightful tortures is notorious and I have repeatedly heard it related how he ceased not during the long agony which he endured to testify his joy that he should be accounted worthy to suffer martyrdom for his Master's cause. He even sang and recited verses of poetry, amongst them the following: "I have returned! I have returned! I have come by the way of Shíráz! I have come with winsome airs and graces! Such is the lover's madness!" "Why do you not dance," asked the executioners mockingly, "since you find death so pleasant?" "Dance!" cried Sulaymán Khán. "In one hand the wine-cup, in one hand the tresses of the Friend. Such a dance in the midst of the market-place is my desire!" [Browne, "A Traveller's Narrative," Note T, pp. 333-4]

Its central theme is the quest after the Perfect Man. But it also can be interpreted as the quest after a human being that has made great progress on the path of spiritual quest, among many other spiritual immature human beings. This is the whole poem in Arberry's translation:

Show your face, for the orchard and rosegarden are my  
desire; open your lips, for abundant sugar is my  
desire.

Sun of beauty, come forth one moment out of the cloud,  
for that glittering, glowing countenance is my  
desire.

Out of your air I heard the sound of the falcon-drum; I  
returned, for the sultan's forearm is my desire.

You said capriciously, "Trouble me no more; be gone!" That  
saying of yours, "Trouble me no more," is my desire,  
And your repulse, "Be gone, the king is not at home," and  
those mighty airs and brusqueness of the  
doorkeeper, are my desire.

In the hand of every one who exists there are filings of  
beauty; that quarry of elegance and that mine are my  
desire.

This bread and water of heaven's wheel are like a  
treacherous torrent; I am a fish, a leviathan, Oman is  
my desire.

Like Jacob I am crying alas, alas; the fair visage of Joseph  
of Canaan is my desire.

By Allah, without you the city is a prison for me; I wander  
abroad, mountain and desert are my desire.

My heart is weary of these weak-spirited fellow-travellers;  
the Lion of God and Rustam-i Dastán are my desire.

My soul is sick of Pharaoh and his tyranny; that light of the  
countenance of Moses son of 'Imrán is my desire.

I am weary of these tearful people so full of complaining;  
that ranting and roaring of the drunkards is my  
desire.

I am more eloquent than the nightingale, but because of  
vulgar envy a seal is on my tongue, and lamentation  
is my desire.

Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand,  
crying, "I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my  
desire."

They said, "He is not to be found, we too have searched."  
He answered, "He who is not to be found is my  
desire."

Though I am penniless, I will not accept a small carnelian,  
for that rare, precious carnelian is my desire.

Hidden from every eye, and all things seen are from Him —  
that hidden One manifest in works is my desire.

My state has gone beyond every desire and yearning; from  
mine and place to the elements is my desire.

My ear heard the tale of faith and became drunk; where is  
the portion of sight? The form of faith is my desire.

In one hand the winecup, in the other the Beloved's curl —  
to dance so in the midst of the arena is my desire.

That rebeck says, "I am dead of expectation; the hand and  
bosom and plectrum of 'Uthmán are my desire."

I am at once Love's rebeck, and Love is my rebeck-player;  
 those favours of the plucking of the All-merciful are  
 my desire.

Cunning minstrel, number the rest of this ode after this  
 fashion, for it is after this fashion I desire.

Show your face from the east, Sun of the Pride of Tabriz; I  
 am the hoopoe, the presence of Solomon is my  
 desire.

The second quoted ghazal by Rûmî is as follows:

The perfume of the Beloved exaleth from the camel hair.

This camel is of the herd of that pearl who is Lord Uways.

Rafati writes that he did not find this distich in the edition of the Díván by Rûmî edited by Şafî 'Alî Sháh in 1361 or 1982-83 AD [*Má'akhidh* 2:275]. We too could not find it in the edition of Rûmî's Díván published by the website RíRÁ, the Free Persian Digital Library, providing access to Persian literature in public domain. This distich will be commented upon in the part of this paper devoted to the poetical language of the Tablet.

The first distich from Rûmî's *Mathnaví* quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in our Tablet is as follows:

When seeds are hidden in the earth, their inward secret  
 becomes the verdure of the garden. [*Mathnaví* 1:177]

This distich is part of a story that narrates of a great king who saw a slave girl, fell in love with her, and bought her, but the girl became sick and none of the king's physicians could heal her. Finally, one day the king found a doctor, who was well known for his special skill. He brought him to his slave and the physician asked to be left alone with her. In his interview with the slave he discovered that the cause of her sickness was that she was in love with a goldsmith from Samarkand. The doctor promised the girl that he would help her, but asked her not to reveal her secret to anyone else. And Rûmî comments upon this advice as follows:

The Prophet said that any one who hides his inmost thought  
 will soon attain to the object of his desire.

When seeds are hidden in the earth, their inward secret  
becomes the verdure of the garden.

If gold and silver were not hidden, how would they get  
nourishment (grow and ripen) in the mine? [ibid.  
1:176-8]

Two verses from this long story are quoted in the Four Valleys:

Let us write, some other way,  
Love's secrets — better so. [*Mathnaví* 1:136, SV 64]

Leave blood and noise and all of these,  
And say no more of Shams-i-Tabriz. [*Mathnaví* 1:142, SV 65]

The two distiches quoted at the end of the Tablet are as follows:

I will cease (from speech): the Sweetheart has begun to  
speak, be (all) ear — *and God best knoweth the right  
course.* [Rúmi, *Mathnaví* 3:3844]

In this day life hath come out of my body, It sayeth to me:  
*verily, unto Him shall we return.* [see Rúmi, *Mathnaví*  
3:3906, Koran 2:156]

The first distich repeats a typical *topos* of Persian lyrical poetry: at the end of a discourse the poet states that he has concluded his argument. In this case, he explains that whenever the Beloved speaks, any other voice becomes superfluous. The second one ascribes silence to the attainment unto annihilation.

Finally, Bahá'u'lláh quotes two distiches by Saná'í. The first one also is quoted in the Four Valleys:

*Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts,  
Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty's rose. [SV 60]  
[which could also be translated: With that rose bud  
no one sleeps with a shirt.]*

*One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two qiblas,  
Either one will please the Beloved, or will consent to one's  
passions.*

These verses are part of a ghazal which says:

Don the garb of faith, so that you may last forever; if  
you won't die in this garb, you will become  
rotten with your shroud.

Faith swallows this and the Other world in a breath, as  
soon as the leviathan of its pain opens its mouth.

One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two  
qiblas. Either one will please the Beloved or will  
consent to one's passions.

Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of  
hearts, Never the shrouded soul unite with  
beauty's rose. [SV 60]

Do not lift the veil of continence and shame from the  
face of belief, that you may not be bewitched by  
the evil eye of the unworthy.

Walk by the Qur'án, 'cause whoever takes refuge in the  
Qur'án escapes the torments of the Other world  
and the temptations of this one.

[Saná'í, Díván [Furúzánfar] 253, translated from the  
Persian by the authors, except the couplet marked SV 60,  
translated by Gail; see Radmihr, *Samavát* 558].

These two distiches also suggest detachment. It is symbolized in the first one by the shirt, which the lower should take off, if he wants to be really close to the Beloved; in the second one by the two qiblihs, one of which — that of passion — should be abandoned, while preserving only that of the Beloved.

## Images used in the Tablet

This Tablet is written in the imaginative language typical of Persian mystics, as most of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings revealed in the Iraqi period. Some of the images may prove less comprehensible for Westerners and thus some of them will be shortly explained.



## The Tablet of the Heart

At the beginning of this Tablet Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*May, God willing, thine heart’s purpose be attained and thy soul’s wish be fulfilled, although it is preferred that we purify this luminous tablet (lawḥ-i-núr), which is among the pages of illuminated breasts (ṣafaḥát-i-af’adiy-i-munírih), from the allusions of both....*” This image is often used by the Sufis to describe the human heart, as the essence of the soul. These are three examples, one from Rúmí and two from Ḥáfiz, respectively:

Recite entirely this ode from the tablet of the heart; regard  
not the tongue, for lips and tongue do not remain.  
[Rúmí, *Mystical Poems* 1:83, no. 96, v.8]

From the tablet of my heart and soul, Thy image, ever goeth  
not:  
From my recollection, that proudly moving cypress ever  
goeth not. [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 462, no. 258, v.1]

On my heart’s tablet is naught save the (straight) alif of the  
Friend’s stature:  
What may I do? Me, recollection of other letter the teacher  
(the murshid) gave not. [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 703, no. 416, v.8]

Bahá'u'lláh Himself sometimes uses this image in other Writings. For example He writes: “*It behoveth every man to blot out the trace of every idle word from the tablet of his heart, and to gaze, with an open and unbiased mind, on the signs of His Revelation, the proofs of His Mission, and the tokens of His glory*” [GWB 11, sec.7, Súriy-i-Qamís]. He also writes: “*... O my brother, when a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must ... wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory*” [KI 192-3, ¶213]. This image reminds us of the Aristotelian “tabula rasa” the *unscribed tablet* [see Aristotle, *De Anima* [On the soul], 3:4, 430-31]. The soul seems described as a tablet upon which the beauteous features of the Face of the Lord can be drawn through the combined efforts of pure love and a purified intellect.

## ***Dil-bar*, the heart-ravisher**

The image of the heart-ravisher or stealer of hearts (*dil-bar*), “Heart-ravishing; a lovely woman, a sweetheart” [Steingass 531], is very common in Persian mystical poetry. Javad Nurbakhsh (1926-2008), a Sufi master who published a 16 volume encyclopedia entitled *Sufi Symbolism*, explains that this locution, which he translates “heart-ravisher,” “is said to represent the attribute of contraction engendered in the heart through ‘anguish’ (*anduh*) and tribulation (*meḥnat*)” [2:40]. Ḥāfīz uses this image in the following distich:

If of the Sulṭān, I formed expectation, a fault it was:  
     If of the Heart-Ravisher (*dil-bar*), I sought fidelity,  
         tyranny he made. [*Dívān* 242, no. 116, v.6; *Dívān*  
         136, “Ghazalyát,” no. 130, v.5]

This image also is included in the verse of Saná’í that Bahá’u’lláh quotes in this Tablet:

*Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts*  
     (*dil-bar*),  
     *Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty’s rose.*  
     [SV 60]

The stealer of hearts describes the cruelty of the Beloved, Who denies Himself to the absolute love of the lover, abandoning him to his pains in the desert of loneliness and remoteness. It is an allusion to God’s unknowability. In the Bahá’í Writings this *topos* is less important, because Bahá’u’lláh has come to bring a glad tidings:

*Behold how the manifold grace of God, which is being  
     showered from the clouds of Divine glory, hath, in this day,  
     encompassed the world. For whereas in days past every  
     lover besought and searched after his Beloved, it is the  
     Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers and is  
     inviting them to attain His presence. Take heed lest ye  
     forfeit so precious a favor; beware lest ye belittle so  
     remarkable a token of His grace.* [GWB 319, sec. CLI, Lawḥ-i-  
     ‘Āshiq va Ma‘shúq]

The day of sadness for lovers are ended, a new age of joy has begun.

## The Beauty's rose

This image also belongs to Saná'í's verses quoted by Bahá'u'lláh. In the Sufi world the rose (*gul*) "symbolizes the result of the knowledge that appears in the heart of the gnostic" (Nurbakhsh 4:39). It may also be interpreted as "the supreme manifestation of Divine beauty or the symbol of the beloved cheek" [Schimmel, *Deciphering* 26]. Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) explains: "in the Islamic tradition, as elsewhere, the rose has pride of place. The Prophet kissed the rose and placed it on his eyes, for 'the red rose is part of God's glory, *kibriya*'. On the other hand, legend claims that the rose grew out of the drops of perspiration which fell from the Prophet's body during his nightly journey — therefore it carries his sweet fragrance" [*Deciphering* 20].

In the Bahá'í collective imagination the rose has come to be especially associated with the story of Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration in the Garden of Ridván in Baghdad, as described by Nabíl. A famous passage by Bahá'u'lláh turns around the images of the rose-garden and the flower par excellence, the rose: "*In the Rose Garden of changeless splendor a Flower hath begun to bloom, compared to which every other flower is but a thorn, and before the brightness of Whose glory the very essence of beauty must pale and wither*" [GWB 320-1, sec. 151, ¶3, Lawḥ-i-‘Áshiq va Ma‘shúq].

## Two qiblas

The above mentioned quotation by Saná'í goes on saying: "One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two qiblas." The Qiblih is "The 'Point of Adoration,' that is, the point to which the worshipper should turn when offering obligatory prayer, is called the Qiblih" ["Preface and Notes" 168n7] and Bahá'u'lláh has decreed: "*The Qiblih is indeed He Whom God will make manifest; whenever He moveth, it moveth, until He shall come to rest*" [KA 68, ¶137]. The poetical image is very clear: the qiblih "symbolizes the focus of the attention of the heart" [Nurbakhsh 3:101] and the heart cannot at the same time turn towards two goals. Either he loves the Beloved or he walks away from Him. The Gospel also states: "*No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to*

*the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon*" [Luke 16:13, KJB].

## The veils

Bahá'u'lláh quotes an hemistich by Ḥáfiz which says: "Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise." The Sufis think that while living on this earthly world each person is separated from the Reality hidden behind everything by many obstacles, which they call "veils:" the veil of the flesh, the veil of passion, the veil of ignorance, the veil of heedlessness, the veil of human learning, the veil of attachment to the glories of the world, the veil of self, etcetera. This image often recurs in the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'u'lláh mentions the "*veils of glory*" [KI 164, ¶175], the "*veils of learning*" [KI 214, ¶237], the "*veil of self*" [GWB 316, sec. 147, Lawḥ-i-Salmán] "*the veils of heedlessness*" [GWB 322, sec. 152, Lawḥ-i-Aḥmad bi Fársí], *the veils of desire* [SLH 31, sec. 1, ¶60. Súriy-i-Haykal], "*veils of light*" [TB 143, Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat], etcetera. 'Abdu'l-Bahá classifies the veils as follows:

*Know thou, verily, there are many veils in which the Truth is enveloped: gloomy veils; then delicate and transparent veils; then the envelopment of Light, the sight of which dazzles the eyes, as doth the sun which is enveloped only in its own light and, as we look at it, the sight is blinded and eyes are dazzled.* [TAB1 71-2]

## Joseph and Jacob

Bahá'u'lláh writes: "*Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay, undoubtedly he would have not necessitated the Egyptian shirt, or an announcer bringing him the glad tiding, or an ambassador speaking to him.*" Joseph, who is presented in the Qur'án not only as a judicious, wise and pious man but also as a youth of such extraordinary beauty as to appear as "*a noble angel*" [12:31], is considered to be the symbol of absolute Beauty. Jacob is viewed as the human soul in search of that Beauty and turned blind because of the many tears it has shed in its remoteness from its Beloved.

## The Egyptian shirt

This allusion to the Egyptian shirt may also be found in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “*Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks*” [KA 20, ¶4]. This verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is commented as follows:

This is an allusion to the story of Joseph in the Qur’án and the Old Testament, in which Joseph’s garment, brought by his brothers to Jacob, their father, enabled Jacob to identify his beloved long-lost son. The metaphor of the fragrant “garment” is frequently used in the Bahá’í Writings to refer to the recognition of the Manifestation of God and His Revelation. [“Preface and Notes” 165 n1]

## The Egypt of fidelity

Bahá’u’lláh mentions “*the Egypt of fidelity (Miṣr-i-vafá)*.” This image also belongs to the overall image of the story of Joseph. Interestingly, when Sufi poets refer to the story of Moses, Egypt, the reign of Pharaoh, the great oppressor of Moses and the Jews, mostly denotes materialism, the prison of the self and passions. This demonstrate the great fluidity of mystic symbolism, which defies the strict rules of the human mind.

## The north of the Spirit (*shimál-i-rúh*)

Bahá’u’lláh writes: “*On the contrary, he would have perceived the pure and sanctified breezes from the north (shimál) of the Spirit and he would have dwelt in perfect union with the Beloved.*” The word *shimál* means both north and left. But when it means “left” it has a negative connotation, as in Koran 56:9, where it denotes the damned souls, as opposed to the right denoting the blessed ones. In this case the locution *shimál-i-rúh* is mentioned, that could be rendered as “the north of the Spirit.” The French Iranist Henry Corbin (1903-1978) writes about *shimál* as north what follows:

Now one of the *leitmotiv* of Iranian Sufi literature is the “Quest for the Orient,” but this is a Quest for an Orient

which, as we are forewarned (if we do not already realize), is not – and cannot be – situated on our geographical maps. This Orient is not comprised in any of the seven *climes* (*keshvar*); it is in fact the *eighth* clime. And the direction in which we must seek this “eighth clime” is not on the horizontal but on the vertical. This suprasensory, mystical Orient, the place of the Origin and of the Return, object of the eternal Quest, is at the heavenly pole; it is the Pole, at the extreme north, so far off that it is the threshold of the dimension “beyond.” That is why it is only revealed to a definite mode of presence in the world, and can be revealed only through this mode of presence. There are other modes to which it will never be revealed. It is precisely this mode of presence that characterizes the mode of being of the Sufi, but also, through his person, the mode of being of the entire spiritual family to which Sufism – and especially Iranian Sufism – belongs. The *Orient* sought by the mystic, the Orient that cannot be located on our maps, is in the direction of the *north*, beyond the north. Only an ascensional progress can lead toward this cosmic north chosen as a point of orientation. [*Man of Light* 2]

Corbin also points out that the north is “on the one hand... the *situs* of the angel Sraoshah (who thus would correspond to the angel Seraphiel); on the other hand this is the qualification given in Sufism to the great shaykh of a period (even the shaykh of a Sufi community, a *tarīqat*, insofar as the latter is taken as the homologue of a microcosm) and for this reason is considered in Shí’ite Sufism as representing the hidden Imám” (ibid. 56). Ḥáfīz uses this metaphor in the two following verses:

O (cool) breeze of the north! the breeze of good news, thou art,  
That, us, at union’s time, reacheth. [*Díván* 621, no. 360, v.1]

The breeze of love’s perfume, I perceived; and, expectant  
of the flashing of the lightning of union, became:

O (cool) breeze of the north! come: for, for the perfume of  
thy body, I die! [*Díván* 626, no.364, v.1]

## The joy of the Divine Presence (*Shawq-i-Iqá*)

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay...] he would have tasted the joy of the Divine Presence and the flavor of eternity.” Bahá'u'lláh Himself explains the spiritual meaning of the concept of the Divine Presence in the Kitáb-i-Íqán: “by ‘attainment unto the divine Presence’ is meant attainment unto the presence of His Beauty in the person of His Manifestation” [KI 170, ¶182].

## The eternal life

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay...] he would have obtained the eternal life...” This concept also is explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán: “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” [KI 142, ¶151].

## Resurrection

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “[Likewise, should the Jacob of love have cleansed the essence of his heart and soul from the foulness of water and clay...] he would have entered into the immortal Paradise after the spiritual resurrection.” Resurrection can be seen in two different perspectives, personal and eschatological. As to the personal perspective, the key to read this metaphor is in the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

*Such things have come to pass in the days of every Manifestation of God. Even as Jesus said: “Ye must be born again” [1 John 3:7]. Again He saith: “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” [2 John 3:5-6]. The purport of these words is that whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the*

*Manifestation of Holiness, he verily is of those that have attained unto "life" and "resurrection" and have entered into the "paradise" of the love of God. And whosoever is not of them, is condemned to "death" and "deprivation," to the "fire" of unbelief, and to the "wrath" of God. In all the scriptures, the books and chronicles, the sentence of death, of fire, of blindness, of want of understanding and hearing, hath been pronounced against those whose lips have tasted not the ethereal cup of true knowledge, and whose hearts have been deprived of the grace of the holy Spirit in their day. Even as it hath been previously recorded: "Hearts have they with which they understand not." [Koran 7:178]. [KI 118-9, ¶125]*

In this case it seems that resurrection is intended in its personal perspective.

**"Everything will perish except His own Face (*kullu shay'in hálíka illa vajhahu*)"** [28:88, Yusuf Ali]

Yusuf Ali comments upon this verse as follows: "This sums up the lesson of the whole Surah. The only Eternal Reality is Allah. His 'Face' or Self, Personality or Being is what we should seek, knowing that it is the only enduring thing of which we can have any conception. The whole phenomenal world is subject to flux and change and will pass away, but He will endure forever" [*The Holy Quran* 1027 n3421]. This Koranic verse appears in a verse by Rúmi in the following context:

I died to the inorganic state and became endowed with  
growth, and (then) I died to (vegetable) growth and  
attained to the animal.

I died from animality and became Adam (man): why, then,  
should I fear? When have I become less by dying?

At the next remove I shall die to man, that I may soar and  
lift up my head amongst the angels;

And I must escape even from (the state of) the angel:  
*everything is perishing except His Face.*

Once more I shall be sacrificed and die to the angel: I shall  
become that which enters not into the imagination.



Then I shall become non-existence: non-existence saith to me, (in tones loud) as an organ, *Verily, unto Him shall we return.*

Know death to be (the thing signified by) what the (Mohammedan) community are agreed upon, namely, that the Water of Life is hidden in the (Land of) Darkness.

Grow from this river-bank, like the water-lily, greedy and craving for death as the sufferer from dropsy.

The water is death to him, and (yet) he is seeking the water and drinking it — and God best knoweth the right course. [*Mathnaví* 3:3901-9]

Human beings are here described in their ascending progress from the mineral world to the station of the angles, and then to their annihilation in their return to God.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a Tablet in which He explained several meanings of the word “face (*vajh*)”:

*The word “face” (vajh) hath many meanings, among which there is submissiveness to the Will of God (riḍá), as God, exalted be He, says: “Seeking His Face” [Koran 6:52], and also: “We feed you for the sake of God alone” [Koran 76:9], and moreover His good-pleasure (riḍá). And the face also means the Essence (dhát). God, exalted be He, says: “Everything ... will perish except His own Face” [Koran 28:88]. And the face (vajh) also means the unveiling (jilwat). God, exalted be He, says: “whithersoever ye turn, there is the Presence of God” [Koran 2:115]. And the face (vajh) hath various interpretations and allusions, beside what hath been said. However, due to lack of time, it hath been chosen not to expatiate the subject. On the ground of all this, submission (taslím) of the face is one thing of the special virtues of the righteous and of the greatest gifts of the free. Whosoever is so aided is graciously favored with absolute faith in the highest level of certitude and assurance. [Makátíb 1:396, provisional translation by the authors]*

## Uways and the camel

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*One ought to perceive the perfume of the Beloved from Uways' camel hair. As the Mathnaví's author says:*

*The perfume of the Beloved exaleth from the camel hair.*

*This camel is of the herd of that pearl who is Lord Uways.*

Uwaysu'l-Qaraní is “a legendary or semi-legendary younger contemporary of Muḥammad said to have been killed at the battle of Šiffín in 37/657, fighting on the side of ‘Alí ... [The legend says that] Muḥammad and Uways corresponded by telepathy” [Bosworth, “Uways al-Qaraní”]. The morning breeze, according to the Tradition, brought to Muhammad the scent of the holiness of Uways al-Qaraní who lived in Yemen.

According to Nurbakhsh, the camel “is said to represent humanity (*ensániyat*)” [4:153].

## Breezes, scents and the Yemen

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*However, the musky fragrance of the Beloved and the breezes of the Merciful have ceased to waft from the Yemen of the Friend.*” In the Sufi language breezes and winds have positive connotations. The breeze, “*nasím*,” is often described as a messenger of love, because at dawn it wafts the scent of the rose, the traditional metaphor of the Beloved, or the musk scent of the Friend. Breezes and winds are often associated with the idea of scent, a concept which has many connotations in the Sufi world. Among them, as in the Western world, a spiritual person may be described as a person in the odor of sanctity. In this case the Tabled alludes to the above mentioned legend of Uways. Yemen, the southern region of the Arabic Peninsula, is here mentioned because it was the place where Uways lived.

## The pearl and the shell

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*Yeah, the casket of the white pearl (lú-lú-i-baydá) is concealed within the sea shell (şadaf), inasmuch as the untouched pearl, which bestows perfect power upon the inner powers of the heart and adds the light of vision to intelligence, is more acceptable and agreeable.*” According to Nurbakhsh the symbol of the pearl refers to the perfect Man. Ebn ‘Arabi refers to it as the “white pearl” [4:240]. As to the shell, according to Nurbakhsh “*it is said to symbolize the form of the multiplicity of the existential names and Attribute*” [4:152]. As to the untouched pearls, they are reminiscent of the Koranic image of the *Hurís*, that are “*large-eyed ones with modest refraining glances, fair like the sheltered egg*” [37:48-9, Rodwell], girls “*with large dark eyes*” [44:54, Rodwell], beautiful “*like jacinths and pearls*” [55:58, Rodwell], “*whom no man nor spirit hath touched before*” [55:56, Rodwell], given as brides to the believers in the Heaven’s gardens of delight. Other meanings of this metaphor are explained in the following words by Bahá'u'lláh: “*How many the húrís of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom! None hath yet approached them; – húrís, ‘whom no man nor spirit hath touched before’*” [KI 70-1, ¶78].

## The arm of the Beloved

In the language of the Sufis the arm, *bázú*, “represents the Divine Will (*masheyat*)” [Nurbakhsh 1:14]. The image is commonly used in Persian mystical poems to describe strength and power. For example Háfiẓ writes:

O sky! Away from the purpose of king Manşúr,<sup>4</sup> thy face  
 turn not  
 The keenness of his sword, behold: the power of his  
 arm, behold. [*Díván* 761, no. 456, v.8]

Bahá'u'lláh uses this image in this Tablet when He says: “*Imagine what will the power of the Friend’s arm do?*”

## The Phoenix of the West and the city of the soul

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*O dear one, thy Companion sayeth that one ought to be purified from the defilement of imitation, so that the Phoenix of the West may emerge from the Orient of the Beloved and wing its flight into the sanctified atmosphere of the Spirit, that is the city of the soul.*” According to Nurbakhsh the Phoenix of the West “is said to represent the Perfect Man, the wayfarer who is in Union, and one who has gnosis of the Divine Essence” [4:148]. In this case we also have the symbolism of the two opposed directions of the West and the East. The West denotes occultation and the East theophany.

As to “the city of the soul (*madíniy-i-ján*),” this locution is reminiscent of a sentence in the Seven Valleys, which says: “*to this evanescent One of the mystic ocean, this station is the first gate of the heart’s citadel, that is, man’s first entrance to the city of the heart*” [SV 41].

## The desert of the intellect and the “swoon”

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “*The lovers of the desert of the intellect have swooned away because of the call from the Unseen.*” Nurbakhsh gives us an interesting background to understand the symbol of the desert:

We know that to reach Mecca, one must pass through cities and cross the desert. Sháh Ne‘matollah,<sup>5</sup> in the following passage, has used the images of “city” and “desert” to symbolize the *nafs* and its inclinations along the way of the “Pilgrimage” to Reality:

“Love of women, property, status, food and drink, or whatever tempts the *nafs*, stands like cities along the way of the ‘Pilgrimage’ to Reality. Once these are passed, the blood-thirsty desert lies ahead and must be traversed for the sake of austerity, the caravan chief being the Prophet. If one is remiss in following him, one falls behind, and is destroyed by the *nafs*, which is like a desert thief.” [3:112]

As to the “swoon,” the Persian locution “*madhúsh shudand*” corresponds with the Arabic word “*ṣá’iq<sup>an</sup>*.” Therefore this sentence seems to be a reference to the story of Moses, and specifically to Moses’s swoon when God showed Himself to Him on Mount Sinai described in the Koran as follows: “*And when God manifested Himself to the mountain he turned it to dust! and Moses fell in a swoon (ṣá’iq<sup>an</sup>)*” [Koran 7:139]. It is the annihilation of the human qualities of the seeker in front of the Manifestation of God. Similar ideas are explained by Bahá’u’lláh in the Four Valleys when He quotes this verse by Saná’i:

*Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee?  
Teach it the science of the love of God!* [SV 52]

In other words, the mind can be deceitful. Only a mind that has been educated and thus transformed through its perusal and internalization of Scripture is a reliable source of knowledge.

### **The moldering bones (‘*aẓm-i-ramím*)**

Bahá’u’lláh writes. “*Such were the joy and the ecstasy and the delight and the happiness, that the breath of the Holy Spirit hath wafted from the moldering bones....*” This image comes from the Koran, which says. “*Who ... shall give life to bones when they are rotten?*” [36:78, Rodwell]. Bahá’u’lláh draws from this verse an attribute of God the “*Fashioner of moulderings bones*” [SLH 53, sec. 1, ¶118, Súriy-i-Haykal], and also “*God, Who fashioneth the crumbling and rotten bones*” [GWB 243, sec. 115, Lawḥ-i-Dhabíh].

### **‘Izrá’íl, Gabriel (*Rúḥu’l-Amín*), and Isráfíl**

Interestingly in the last part of the Tablet three angels are directly or indirectly mentioned: ‘Izrá’íl, the angel of death, Gabriel, the angel of revelation, and Isráfíl, the angel of life.

As to ‘Izrá’íl, of the one who is “purified from the defilement of imitation” Bahá’u’lláh says: “*‘Izrá’íl, the angel of death, will stand as a servant at His door, ready to serve Him.*” The Koran says: “*Say: The angel of death, who is charged with you, shall cause you to die; then shall he be returned to your Lord*” (32:11). The name of this

angel is, according to tradition, ‘Izrá’íl or Azrá’íl (the servant of the Highest), in English Azrael. He may be compared to Ezrael, the angel of divine wrath of the Christian apocrypha. Rúmí defines him as “tyrannous and enraged” [*Mathnaví* 5:1571]. The tradition describes Izrá’íl as an enormous angel who appears in a different shape to believers and unbelievers. He appears to a dying believer as a pleasant and reassuring vision, but to an infidel as the most terrifying figure.

As to Gabriel, Bahá’u’lláh writes. “*Such were the joy and the ecstasy and the delight and the happiness, that the breath of the Holy Spirit hath wafted from the moldering bones and the Spirit of Faith hath winged its flight on the wings of success.*” Shoghi Effendi translates the locution *Rúḥu’l-Amín* [literally, the Trusted Spirit] “Gabriel” [GWB 103, sec. 50], and “*Spirit of God*” [KI 114, ¶121]. Rúmí Writes: “Since the Name of Ahmad became (to the Christians) an impregnable fortress, what then must be the Essence of that trusted Spirit?” [1:738]. According to Nurbakhsh “The trusted Spirit normally refers to Gabriel, although occasionally in Rumi’s *Mathnaví* it may represent the Moḥammadan Spirit” [9:100].

As to Isráfíl, Bahá’u’lláh writes: “*The Isráfíl of life wondereth with which melody he could wake up these companions and beseecheth that haply he may share their swoon (bí-húshī).*” Israfíl, whose etymology could be the same as Seraphim, corresponds to the English Seraphiel. In the Muslim tradition he is the angel who in the Day of Judgement will awake the dead “calling” them with his trumpet. The Qur’án [54:6-8] calls him “the summoner (*dá’í*)”. Rúmí describes him as the “life of the body,” whereas he describes Gabriel as the “life of the inspired spirit” [*Mathnaví* 5:1566, 1565]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has reportedly said that the two angels ‘Izrá’íl and Isráfíl are symbols:

*As by the will of God the power of composition exists, so, also by will of God the power of decomposition exists.*

*These two are expressed in scripture by “Isráfíl” the angel who gives life to men, and the Angel of Death who takes it away. The first is the power of composition or attraction, the other the power of decomposition. They are not angels. [qtd. in Goodall and Goodall Cooper 43-4]*

***and God best knoweth the right course***

(w'alláhua'lambi's-şawáb)

This statement is frequently used by Rûmî in his *Mathnavî*. It comes from a Koranic verse which says: “*The Day that the Spirit and the angels will stand forth in ranks, none shall speak except any who is permitted by (Allah) Most Gracious, and he will say what is right (aş-şawában)*” [78:38, Yusuf Ali].

***verily, unto Him shall we return*** [Rûmî, *Mathnavî* 3:3906, Koran 2:156]

This Koranic verse is often used in the Bahá'í Writings, as for example the Seven Valleys, The Four Valleys, and Javáhiru'l-Asrár. It is an allusion to the so called “second birth,” that is, that process whereby the human soul gradually detaches itself from the lower world, and actualizes its God-given spiritual attributes.

## **The contents of the Tablet**

It is not certainly easy to summarize the contents of a Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. He quotes an Islamic tradition which says: “*We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain*” [KI 255, ¶283]. And thus we will be satisfied with a very short review of this inspiring Text.

Bahá'u'lláh wishes that the most cherished desires of His addressee may be fulfilled. However, He suggests that the highest aspiration of a human heart, that is, the attainment unto His Holy Presence, will be fulfilled, only if the soul will forget anything else but its Lord. This overall concept is conveyed, in a language enriched by poetical images and quotations, through six different explanations.

First. The first quotation — “Last night the shaikh went all about the city, lamp in hand crying, ‘I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my desire’” [Rûmî, *Mystical Poems* 1:46, no. 51, v.14] — is in itself, as it often is the case with mystic writings, an epitome of the whole Tablet. The shaykh is tired to meet with people who may be compared to “beast and devil,” he wants to finally find a real human being. And Bahá'u'lláh wrote later in a Tablet: “*Lofty is the station of man, were*

*he to hold fast to righteousness and truth and to remain firm and steadfast in the Cause. In the eyes of the All-Merciful a true man appeareth even as a firmament; its sun and moon are his sight and hearing, and his shining and resplendent character its stars. His is the loftiest station, and his influence educateth the world of being*” [TB 219, Kitáb-i-Ahd]. Therefore the whole Tablet is about the quest for a man who has attained unto his divinely appointed lofty station.

Second. The second quotation emphasizes the importance of detachment in two different perspectives:

Never the covetous heart shall come to the stealer of hearts,  
 Never the shrouded soul unite with beauty’s rose [SV 60].  
 With that rose bud no one sleeps with a shirt.  
 One cannot advance in the path of oneness with two  
 qiblas,  
 Either one will please the Beloved, or will consent to  
 one’s passions. [Saná’i, *Díván* [Furúzánfar] 253]

The first verse recommends detachment through the language of erotic-mystical poetry: the closest intimacy with the Beloved requires that the lover takes off even his shirt. Soon after the Tablet suggests that the most important detachment is that from oneself, here described as a veil: “Ḥáfiz! thou thyself art thy own veil. From the midst, arise” [Ḥáfiz, *Díván* 534, 308:9]. The second verse uses the language of the ascetic. The ascetic cannot have two qiblihs. Nurbakhsh explains that the qiblih “symbolizes the focus of attention of the heart” [3:101]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said on the subject of the attachment of the heart:

*God has given man a heart and the heart must have some attachment. We have proved that nothing is completely worthy of our heart’s devotion save reality, for all else is destined to perish. Therefore the heart is never at rest and never finds real joy and happiness until it attaches itself to the eternal. How foolish the bird that builds its nest in a tree that may perish when it could build its nest in an ever-verdant garden of paradise.*



*Man must attach himself to an infinite reality, so that his glory, his joy, and his progress may be infinite. Only the spirit is real; everything else is as shadow. [ADP 133]*

Third. Later on the Tablet explains that if Jacob would have been wholly purified from his attachment to the world, he would have found Joseph even without the assistance of his shirt. It is a reference to the story of Joseph, that has been explained above [Koran 12:93-96].

Fourth. The Tablet explains that only through detachment the meaning of the Koranic verse 28:88, “*Everything will perish except His own Face,*” will become apparent. In other words, only a detached person is able to look at the world “*with the eye of God*” [SV 17] and thus to behold “*the brilliant rays of the divine sun shining from the dawning-point of Essence alike on all created things, and the lights of singleness reflected over all creation*” [ibid.].

Fifth. A detached person recognizes the Perfect Man even in the smell of the hair of the camel of Uwaysu'l-Qaraní. The Uways of the legend worked as the guardian of the camels of his tribe and wore a rough cloak made of camel hair [see Attár, *Tadhkiratu'l-Awlya*, Dhikr 2]. He was an ascetic and lived in loneliness, detached from all the things of the world. He was so poor and destitute, that no one would have thought him to be a true saint. This reference to Uways is followed by a passage, that is not easily comprehensible. It could allude to the fact that the time was not yet ripe for Bahá'u'lláh to announce His Manifestation.

Sixth. Only a detached seeker will see the Phoenix winging its flight and taking its place in the city of the soul. The Phoenix is the symbol of the Manifestation of God. The city of the soul is the symbol of the human heart. This image is reminiscent of one of the images of the Seven Valleys:

*Whensoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: “A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth....” For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the*

*dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will.* [SV 22]

In both cases the Manifestation of God takes His place in a human heart that approaches Him in a detached attitude of prayer and adoration.

The Tablet ends with a difficult passage, which could allude to Bahá'u'lláh's high station, here described as that of One to Whom angels promptly render service.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A verse very similar to this may be found in a ghazal by Muṣlihu'd-Dín Sa'dí (ca. 1184–1291). See Rafati, *Má'akhidh* 4:81-4. It says: “Shíráz will be thrown into a tumult by Thine upsetting and joyous gaze | I fear lest this turmoil may inflame Shíráz (*Shírázpur-ghawgháshud-ast az fitniy-i-chashm-i-khushat* | *tars-am kiháshúbí 'ajab bar ham zanad Shíráz-rá*).”
- <sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Rafati, *Yádnámih* 296, provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghani. The authors thank Mr. Ghaemmaghani for having given his permission to use it in this paper.
- <sup>3</sup> We did not find this *ghazal* in the collections of Rúmí's *ghazals* recorded on the Internet.
- <sup>4</sup> A Muzaffarid king of Iran, who reigned between ca. 1391 and ca. 1393.
- <sup>5</sup> Sháh Ni'matulláh Valí (1330-1431) was a Sufi master and poet.

# The Mathnaví of Rúḥu'lláh, the Martyr<sup>1,2</sup>

translated by Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

Fill up the wine-cup, O Cupbearer, to the brim;  
By Thy liquor, set the Sinai of the heart on fire.  
Hand me the goblet of the wine of *Alast*,<sup>3</sup>  
That from the fumes of drunkenness I may be aroused.  
I'll rend veils, fancies and doubts;  
I'll fly towards the peaks of the Seventh Heaven.  
I'll go beyond the muddy snare of the flesh;  
I'll make for the chaste realm of the soul.  
From the rose-garden of the spirit, I'll inhale the scent of the Loved  
One;  
From the abode of the Beloved, I'll come back like a breeze,  
With soul-stirring scented breaths,  
With blessed and cheerful glad-tidings.  
I proclaim to my travelling companions: Hasten,  
O my friends! The Day of the Covenant hath come!  
Hasten, O lovers of the Face of the Beloved!  
Turn your hearts to the abode of the Adored One!  
O companions! Seize the moment!  
Assist and help the Cause of God!  
Strive, O friends, that this brilliant sun  
may shine above all the regions of the earth!

Struggle, that the signs of the almighty Lord  
    May be spread throughout this globe.

Make an effort, O my friends! The time to serve hath come!  
    It is now the day to earn bestowals! It is the hour of success!

Hoisting the flags of guidance, march  
    Towards the world, O lovers of Bahá,

That these intoxicated creatures may awaken  
    And move away from fancies and doubts,

And the light of God may enlighten their eyes,  
    And the thorns of their hearts may become roses.

The ancient Ruler hath thus decreed  
    For all the peoples, in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

Whosoever will arise for the Cause of God,  
    The Lord of Creation will come to his rescue.

Whosoever will lay down his life in this age of God,  
    To him the Lord will turn His Face.

O Cupbearer! Kindly proffer the cup of Thy gifts,  
    That I may be cleansed from crimes and faults.

Even with my countless transgressions,  
    I hopefully expect the favor of my God.

Hail, O Cupbearer at the eternal banquet,  
    Graciously pour a wine drop on this dust,

That these patterns may be brightened by Thy bounty,  
    That we may be sacrificed for the One Beloved.

When shall I offer this life, O my Lord,  
    In Thy pathway in my love for Thy Face?

Happy the day, when in the field of love I shall tender  
    My life on the way of the Sovereign of love!

Blessed the hour, when on the gallows  
    The King of Glory I shall exalt!

O God! May soon come the day  
    When of this withered body I shall get rid;

When, blooming and happy for His Presence grace,  
    Towards the everlasting Heaven I shall direct my steps!

I'm on fire in the desert of exclusion;  
I burn in the flames of separation.  
O King of life, lift up the veil hiding Thy Face,  
That the skies may resplend with Thy light.  
O Lord of the Testament! O King of the Covenant!  
O Thou by Whose fire the Sinai of the Pledge hath been lit!  
O Thou Whose name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá! For Thee  
The flags of Guidance have been unfurled:  
Thou art the Dayspring of the Divine mysteries;  
Thou art the Wellspring of the Divine signs.  
O mighty King of Kings, as an *Alif*,<sup>4</sup>  
Thou risest above the Cause of God,  
In Thy servitude, submissive as a *Bih*,<sup>5</sup>  
At the gate of the garden of the Lord of Bahá.  
O Most Great Branch of the Tree of the Cause!  
O Twig sprouted from the Ancient Essence!  
Thou art the spring of God's inspiration! Thou  
Illuminest the eyes of the people of Bahá!  
Bestow a drop of kindness on this puny bird,  
Restless and impatient in his remoteness from Thee!  
In this Day, O King of the Kingdom of the heart,  
My breast burneth in its separation from Thee.  
I'm ablaze, O my King, with the fire of exclusion,  
In this wilderness of yearning and seclusion.  
Set free this bird from the snare of anguish,  
O King of grace and Sovereign of bounty!  
Look not at my merits or worth,  
Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Persian text is published in Afnan, “Taḍmín Maṭḥnaví Jináb-i-Rúḥu’lláh Varqá” 225-226.
- <sup>2</sup> The translators thank Mrs. Faraneh Vargha-Khadem for having sent them the text of the poem and encouraged them to translate it into English.
- <sup>3</sup> A reference to Koran 7:172. According to Koranic spiritual exegesis, this verse alludes to a primal metahistorical event, when human souls enjoyed a mysterious existence in God before time was created. In that station before time, God put the question, “Am I not (*Alast*) your Lord?,” and received from the souls the immediate and joyful answer: “Yes, we testify.” In that moment humankind undersigned, so to say, an eternal Covenant with its Lord, Whom it promised to recognize however and wherever He would manifest Himself, ready to accept the consequences of any eventual disloyalty.
- <sup>4</sup> *Alif* is the first letter of the Persian alphabet and it has the form of a vertical straight line |.
- <sup>5</sup> *Bih* is the second letter of the Persian alphabet and it has the form of an horizontal curved line ب.
- <sup>6</sup> This verse is by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, see *Majmú’ih* 13:411-2, verse 7.



# The Mathnaví by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá, the Martyr: A Few Notes on Its Historical Context and Poetical Content

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

## Abstract

A tentative translation of the Mathnaví by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá, the martyr, is presented [above]. It is accompanied by a concise commentary of the content of his poem. After a few words on the mathnaví in Persian literature, the most important images presented in the poem are briefly explained: the motif of the cup-bearer and the cup, springtime motifs, love motifs. The poem is a hymn of love to the Blessed Beauty. However, in the final 10 verses after verse 31 the poet turns to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and it closes his eulogy with a quotation of a verse from one of the Master's poems (Ay Khudáy-i-Pur-'Aṭáy-i-Dhu'l-Manán), a rhetorical device called *Taḍmín*.

While describing the lives and martyrdom of Mírzá 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá and of his son Rúḥu'lláh, Adib Taherzadeh wrote: "Truly, Rúḥu'lláh was no ordinary child. He was an inspired being and acted as a spiritual giant. At a young age he wrote beautiful poetry which clearly demonstrates how deep was his love for Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, how vast his knowledge of the Faith and how profound his understanding of the real purpose of life" [*Revelation* 4:60]. These qualities clearly emerge from the verses of the

*mathnaví* composed by this young hero, whose first English translation is being presented in this paper.

## The *mathnaví* in Persian literature

Edward G. Browne (1862-1926), the renowned British Orientalist, defines the *mathnaví* ‘narrative poem in doublets’ [*Literary History* 1:18] and describes it as ‘the most ancient essentially Persian verse form... [after the quatrain or *rubá’í*] where the rhyme changes in each couplet’ [ibid. 473]. *Mathnavís* have been written in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish and Urdu cultures. Johannes Thomas Pieter de Bruijn, Professor Emeritus of Persian at the University of Leiden, explains that ‘the Persians call it *mathnawí* because each line requires two rhyming letters... Etymologically, it is often explained as a *nisba* adjective to the Arabic word *mathná*, “two by two”...’. The most important features of the *mathnaví* may be summarized as follows:

**Length:** de Bruijn explains that ‘In principle, there were no limits to the length of a *mathnawí*... [with the exception of Firdawsí’s *Sháh-Námih*<sup>1</sup> and Rúmi’s *Mathnawíy-ma’nawí*], most of the better-known poems fall within a range of 2,000 to 9,000 *bayts*, but the form was also used for texts of a much lesser extent. Fragments of no more than a few lines with the rhyme scheme of the *mathnawí* can be found as inserted lines in prose works’.

**Rhyme:** In this poetic composition ‘each hemistich rhymes with its companion and each verse has a new rhyme’ [Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana” 356], and thus its classic rhyme scheme is *aa bb cc*, etc. ‘Other poems were occasionally inserted into a *mathnawí* text, either with or without the use of their specific rhyme scheme ... Prose and poetry were in some cases used alternatively’ [de Bruijn].

**Metre:** It is ‘written in a restricted number of metres. These metres always have eleven or, more rarely, ten syllables...’ [de Bruijn].

**Narrative syntax:** ‘The narrative syntax of almost all the Persian *mathnavís* remains essentially paratactic, like that of the language [“Letteratura neopersiana” 365].

**Contents:** It ‘is used in extensive narratives and long stories which cannot easily be treated of in poems with one specific rhyming

letter...' [de Bruijn]. Its genres 'are not restricted to the heroic, the romantic and the didactic, the three usually associated with this verse form. Panegyrics and satire, topical events, love and wine, and many others subjects could also be dealt with in a *mathnaví* ... During the later Middle Ages, new subjects were added to the répertoire of the narrative *mathnaví*... At the same time, mystical poems continuing the examples set by Saná'í, 'Aṭṭār and Djalál al-Dín Rúmí proliferated' [de Bruijn].

According to Bausani the *mathnaví* had lost its expressive power in the last centuries. He wrote:

And thus, the *maṣnaví* also has arrived on the threshold of the contemporary age offering, together with a number of naive religious poem in "popular" style — usually despised ... — mystic-symbolic poems, wholly inadequate to our modern world as well as theoretical and didactic meditations which the modern world conceives only as written in prose. This makes us understand that in the contemporary Iran the *maṣnaví* is condemned to a radical decline, perhaps more than the other forms of traditional poetry. [ibid. 439]

However, the *mathnaví* we are presenting seems to contradict Bausani's judgment, since it is rich in inspiration and uses with great mastery "the motifs, images and metaphors" of the ancient and glorious Persian poems.

Moreover, the *mathnaví* seems to have been especially appreciated by the Bábis and Bahá'ís. Franklin Lewis, an expert in Persian Language and Literature, especially Rúmí, remarks in this regard:

There is... a *mathnaví* written in praise of Bahá'u'lláh attributed to Táhirih. Whether this poem is indeed hers or not, it is clear that the *mathnaví* was a form appreciated by many of the Bábis and, later on, by Iranian Bahá'ís... Nabíl-i Zarandí, author of the *Dawn-Breakers*, after completing his pilgrimage to the House of the Báb in Shiraz as per Bahá'u'lláh's instructions in the *Súriy-i Hajj*, composed a *mathnaví* describing the experience. Nabíl also composed another *mathnaví* describing the history of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Both of Nabíl's *mathnavís* seem to derive their

inspiration from Bahá'u'lláh's own *Mathnaví-i Mubárák*.  
 ["Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví-i Mubárák*" 113]

## The language of Rúḥu'lláh Varqá's *mathnaví*

Although *mathnavís* are not considered lyrical works, still the four major themes of Persian lyrical poetry as described by Bausani, that is "wine, love, springtime and mystics" ["Letteratura neopersiana" 176], occupy a central position in this poem by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá. Associated with springtime motifs are many nature tropes. Also theological and scriptural motifs are widely used in this poem. Last but not least, there also are didactic themes.

### *The cup-bearer*

Immediately in verse 1 we find the figure of the cupbearer and the cup. The cup-bearer also is mentioned in verse 19 and 21. This poem has the form *Sáqí-namih*, often translated "The Book of the Cup-Bearer", whose main personage is a mysterious *sáqí*, who according to many Iranists is "an initiator to the mysteries of wine and love" [Saccone, "Prefazione" 216 n1]. A famous example is the *Sáqí-namih* by Ḥáfiz, translated The Book of the Cup-bearer. William L. Hanaway, Emeritus Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (Persian) University of Pennsylvania remarks:

*sáqí* – cup-bearer, the person charged with pouring wine... Physical beauty was important in the choice of individuals to be wine servers. Bayhaqí [famous Persian historian of the 5th/11th century] describes festive occasions when the *sáqís*, whom he calls *máhrúyán* "moon-faced", would appear splendidly attired and attract the amorous glances of courtiers. These characteristics of the *sáqí*, sc. being a Turk, military training, exceptional beauty, and closeness to the ruler, help explain the image of the *sáqí* as it developed in poetry after the 5th/11th century. ["*Sáqí*: In Persian Usage"]

This familiar personage of Persian mystic poetry has his origin in the Koran and in the traditions. Carlo Saccone, an expert in and a translator of Persian poetry into Italian, comprising the whole *Díván*

by Kháji Shamsu'd-Dín Muḥammad Ḥáfiz-i-Shírází (ca. 1318-1390), writes that “the wine which he, incessantly invoked and implored, pours into the cup of the lover/poet clearly reveals its sacred *imprinting*, i.e., it is a transposition of the ‘mysterious’ wine which the youthful cup-bearers of Muslim paradise offer to the blessed spirits” [“Sensi e soprasensi” 44].

Bausani explains that the Sufis relate the cup-bearer to ‘the ancient mystic legend wherefore at the beginning of the Divine Love, the cup-bearer (*sáqí*), as God-the Beloved, poured the wine for God-the Lover during forty successive dawns and thus he created the world’ [‘Letteratura neopersiana’ 162; see *Religion in Iran* 277]. Sufis also relate the motifs of the cup-bearer, wine and drunkenness to the *rúz-i-alast*, the metahistorical morning when human souls entered into the eternal Covenant with their Creator, which is the basis of their life on earth and of the development of human civilization [see HW Persian no. 19]. According to the German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003), the Sufis

saw this moment in poetical imagery as a spiritual banquet in which the wine of Love was distributed to humanity so that everyone received the share which he or she will have in this life. Here, the imagery of wine is used not for the final goal of the mystic’s unification with God and his being filled with Him, but rather as the starting point of the flow of Divine grace at the beginning of time. [*Deciphering* 109]

Finally, according to Saccone, the cup-bearer sometimes symbolizes the Beloved himself, as

an initiator, i.e., he who ... initiates the poet ... into the mysteries of wine and love for him [God]. [And the poet’s] initiation ... is essentially a summon to folly, to disarm one’s intellect and its analytic processes, because the lover will attain unto the reunion with his friend ... only in the condition of ‘sacred folly,’ fostered by his drunkenness. [“Sensi e soprasensi” 49, 50]

Bahá'u'lláh mentions the *Sáqí* in at least three of His poems, *Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá*, *Sáqí bi-dih ábí*, and *Sáqí bi-dih án jám* [see Ishráq Khávarí, *Má'idíy-i-Asmání* 4:176-211].

### *The cup*

The image of the cup is associated with the image of the cup-bearer. The symbolic meanings of the words denoting a “cup” have been commented upon at length by many writers. Saná'í and 'Aṭṭār see it as a symbol of the human heart, and Gnostic thinkers as the Knowing Soul (*nafs-i-dáná*), that is a human soul which having been purified has become crystal-clear. Ḥáfiz says that the cup is the “intimate illuminating soul of the Friend.” “Cup” in Persian is also called *paymáníh*, a word resembling *paymán*, which means covenant. Therefore the two concepts are often used together in a play on words [see Bausani, *Religion in Iran* 262]. In the Muslim world, Covenant especially means the Covenant between God and man. If man submits to the laws of God, God in His turn will purify his soul, and will enable him to grow spiritually. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, an Italian Catholic Biblicist, theologian, archaeologist and Hebraist explains the meaning of the symbol of the cup in the Hebrew world:

Although the cup is a liturgical element (especially in Easter Judaic and Eucharistic rites), it becomes a relevant symbol to denote the destiny of a person, because of the idea that a cup contains a certain amount of liquid. We thus have the cup of salvation [Psalms 116:13] and especially that of the divine judgment, the cup of fury [Isaiah 51:17-22], which also is a sign of death ... [500 *curiosità* 47]

As has been said, Rúḥu'lláh mentions the Cupbearer in three verses:

Fill up the wine-cup, O Cupbearer, to the brim;  
By Thy liquor, set the Sinai of the heart on fire. [1]

O Cupbearer! Kindly proffer the cup of Thy gifts,  
That I may be cleansed from crimes and faults. [19]

Hail, O Cupbearer at the eternal banquet,  
Graciously pour a wine drop on this dust,

That these patterns may be brightened by Thy bounty,  
That we may be sacrificed for the One Beloved. [20-1]

Who else is this Cupbearer, this heavenly Person, if not Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Beloved *par excellence*. And what else is His wine, if not His soul-entrancing Word? Bahá'u'lláh kindles the fire of love in the poet's heart. And since this poet responds to His offer, He cleanses his heart "from crimes and faults." He prepares it to the highest proof of love: offering his life on the path of service.

### *Springtime motifs*

In our poem, the Anacreontic themes, strictly connected with mystical themes, easily turn into springtime motifs. And the young poet speaks of "the rose-garden of the spirit (*gulshan-i-ján*)," of "the scent of the Loved One (*búy-i-Dúst*)," of a "breeze (*násím*)," and of "soul-stirring scented breathes (*mu'aṭṭar nafḥih-háy-i-jánfazá*)."

In the Bahá'í Writings springtime has mostly been associated to the days of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad from 22 April to 3 May 1863:

*The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching. Bestir thyself, and magnify, before the entire creation, the name of God, and celebrate His praise, in such wise that all created things may be regenerated and made new. Speak, and hold not thy peace. The day star of blissfulness shineth above the horizon of Our name, the Blissful, inasmuch as the kingdom of the name of God hath been adorned with the ornament of the name of thy Lord, the Creator of the heavens. Arise before the nations of the earth, and arm thyself with the power of this Most Great Name, and be not of those who tarry.* [GWB 27, sec. XIV, ¶1, Lawḥ-i-Riḍván]

Bahá'u'lláh also writes about springtime in other Tablets:

*Seize the time, therefore, ere the glory of the divine springtime hath spent itself, and the Bird of Eternity ceased to warble its melody, that thy inner hearing may not be deprived of hearkening unto its call.* [KI 24, ¶23]

*It behoveth you to refresh and revive your souls through the gracious favours which in this Divine, this soul-stirring Springtime are being showered upon you. [TB 86, Lawḥ-i-Dunyá]*

An evidence of His bonds with springtime also is present in a prayer He wrote while He was confined in the citadel of ‘Akká:

*Glory to Thee, O my God! The first stirrings of the spring of Thy grace have appeared and clothed Thine earth with verdure. The clouds of the heaven of Thy bounty have rained their rain on this City within whose walls is imprisoned Him Whose desire is the salvation of Thy creatures. Through it the soil of this City hath been decked forth, and its trees clothed with foliage, and its inhabitants gladdened. [PM 199, sec. 117, ¶1]*

The image of springtime as the beginning of a new Dispensation is a typical feature of the Writings and talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who, while dealing with progressive revelation, described the advent of the new Manifestation of God as a new springtime:

*Soon the whole world, as in springtime, will change its garb. The turning and falling of the autumn leaves is past; the bleakness of the winter time is over. The new year hath appeared and the spiritual springtime is at hand. The black earth is becoming a verdant garden; the deserts and mountains are teeming with red flowers; from the borders of the wilderness the tall grasses are standing like advance guards before the cypress and jessamine trees; while the birds are singing among the rose branches like the angels in the highest heavens, announcing the glad-tidings of the approach of that spiritual spring, and the sweet music of their voices is causing the real essence of all things to move and quiver. [TAB2 318-9]*

Echoes of these words must have come to the ears of Rúḥu’lláh, who implicitly relates these springtime motifs with the “Day of the Covenant (*Yawm-i-Míthaq*).”

From the rose-garden of the spirit, I’ll inhale the scent of the  
Loved One;  
From the abode of the Beloved, I’ll come back like a  
breeze,



With soul-stirring scented breaths,  
 With blessed and cheerful glad-tidings.

I proclaim to my travelling companions: Hasten,  
 O my friends! The Day of the Covenant hath come!

### *Love motifs*

The whole poem is a hymn of love, not only for Bahá'u'lláh but also for 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The first part of the poem conveys the deep love of the poet for the "Loved One (*Dúst*)," the "Beloved (*Dúst*)" and the "Adored One (*Dúst*)": he summons his readers to "assist and help" His Cause, to teach His Faith, that it "may shine above all the regions of the earth." If they want to be worthy of such an honor, they should "move away from fancies and doubts," "the thorns of their hearts" should become "roses;" they should be assured that "The Lord of Creation will come to... [their] rescue." But most of all they should be "on fire in the desert of exclusion," and "burn in the flames of separation," so that they may be ready to offer their lives on His path.

### *The end of the poem*

From verse 31 the poet turns to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The special love that Rúḥu'lláh had for 'Abdu'l-Bahá reflected the same love that flourished in his father after an episode described by Adib Taherzadeh as follows:

Once Bahá'u'lláh spoke to Varqá [Rúḥu'lláh's father] about the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and extolled His virtues and heavenly qualities. He said that in this world of being there was a phenomenon which He had referred to in some Tablets as the 'Most Great Elixir'. Any person who possessed this power would be able to exert enormous influence in the world through his work and could do anything he desired... And now, look at the Master. Observe with what patience and compassion He dealt with all types of people. He possessed this power, therefore immeasurable was the extent of the influence He would exert upon the world of humanity.

When Varqá heard this, he was so filled with joy and excitement that he fell prostrate at Bahá'u'lláh's feet and begged Him to make it possible for him and one of his sons to lay down their lives in the path of the Master. Bahá'u'lláh favoured him with His acceptance. When he returned to Persia, Varqá wrote to Bahá'u'lláh and renewed his plea for martyrdom, a plea to which He again favourably responded. And... this happened; he was martyred during the Ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. [*Revelation* 4:56-7]

Rúḥu'lláh describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His glory, erect "as an *Alif*," and in His utter submission to the Will of God, 'submissive as a *bih*." This use of the Arabic alphabet is not uncommon in the verses of the mystic Persian poets. For example Shamsu'd-Dín Ḥáfiz (ca. 1318-1390) writes:

On my heart's tablet is naught save the (straight) alif... of  
the Friend's stature:

What may I do? Me, recollection of other letter the teacher  
(the murshid) gave not. [*Díván* 703, no. 416, v.8]

The verses addressed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá are 10. And they end with a *taḍmín*,<sup>2</sup> a quotation of a verse by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself:

Look not at my merits or worth,

Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord. [*Majmú'ih* 13:411-2, verse  
7; provisional translation by the authors]

The whole poem may be inadequately rendered in English as follows:

He is God.

O God of all graces and Lord of all bounties,

Who knowest my heart, my secrets, and my soul!

Every morning Thou art the Companion of my soul.

Thou knowest my anguish and my distress.

Fastened to Thy remembrance, this heart

Only Thy angst as a companion longs for.

Perish the heart which does not burn for Thee!

Be blinded the eye that does not cry for Thee!  
 O Almighty, in this darksome night,  
 in my heart Thy remembrance is a glowing lamp.  
 Upon my heart breathe the breath of life, by Thy bounty,  
 That non-existence, by Thy grace, into eternity may turn.  
 Look not at my merits or worth,  
 Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord.  
 Upon these broken-winged birds,  
 By Thy benevolence, new wings bestow.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

At the end of our perusal of this *Mathnaví*, we can but express our astonishment and awe in front of this twelve-year-old boy, who demonstrated through his verses and much more his behavior, that not only he had preserved his heart as a mirror “*upon which no dust has fallen*”, as that of a child, but that he also had acquired most of “*the divine perfections latent in the heart of man*” [PUP 72, ¶2, 73, ¶4].

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi Tusi (c. 940-1020), the greatest Persian epic poet.

<sup>2</sup> *Taḍmín*: “inserting the verses of another in one’s own poem” (Steingass 306), that is quoting a “very famous verse of another poet” (Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana,” p. 178).

<sup>3</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Majmú'ih* 13:208; see also *Aḏhkáru'l-Muqarrabín* 2:135. A provisional translation by Mardani and Savi.

# The Mathnaví of Rúḥu'lláh, the Martyr<sup>1,2</sup>

translated by Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

Fill up the wine-cup, O Cupbearer, to the brim;  
By Thy liquor, set the Sinai of the heart on fire.  
Hand me the goblet of the wine of *Alast*,<sup>3</sup>  
That from the fumes of drunkenness I may be aroused.  
I'll rend veils, fancies and doubts;  
I'll fly towards the peaks of the Seventh Heaven.  
I'll go beyond the muddy snare of the flesh;  
I'll make for the chaste realm of the soul.  
From the rose-garden of the spirit, I'll inhale the scent of the Loved  
One;  
From the abode of the Beloved, I'll come back like a breeze,  
With soul-stirring scented breaths,  
With blessed and cheerful glad-tidings.  
I proclaim to my travelling companions: Hasten,  
O my friends! The Day of the Covenant hath come!  
Hasten, O lovers of the Face of the Beloved!  
Turn your hearts to the abode of the Adored One!  
O companions! Seize the moment!  
Assist and help the Cause of God!  
Strive, O friends, that this brilliant sun  
may shine above all the regions of the earth!

Struggle, that the signs of the almighty Lord  
    May be spread throughout this globe.

Make an effort, O my friends! The time to serve hath come!  
    It is now the day to earn bestowals! It is the hour of success!

Hoisting the flags of guidance, march  
    Towards the world, O lovers of Bahá,

That these intoxicated creatures may awaken  
    And move away from fancies and doubts,

And the light of God may enlighten their eyes,  
    And the thorns of their hearts may become roses.

The ancient Ruler hath thus decreed  
    For all the peoples, in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

Whosoever will arise for the Cause of God,  
    The Lord of Creation will come to his rescue.

Whosoever will lay down his life in this age of God,  
    To him the Lord will turn His Face.

O Cupbearer! Kindly proffer the cup of Thy gifts,  
    That I may be cleansed from crimes and faults.

Even with my countless transgressions,  
    I hopefully expect the favor of my God.

Hail, O Cupbearer at the eternal banquet,  
    Graciously pour a wine drop on this dust,

That these patterns may be brightened by Thy bounty,  
    That we may be sacrificed for the One Beloved.

When shall I offer this life, O my Lord,  
    In Thy pathway in my love for Thy Face?

Happy the day, when in the field of love I shall tender  
    My life on the way of the Sovereign of love!

Blessed the hour, when on the gallows  
    The King of Glory I shall exalt!

O God! May soon come the day  
    When of this withered body I shall get rid;

When, blooming and happy for His Presence grace,  
    Towards the everlasting Heaven I shall direct my steps!

I'm on fire in the desert of exclusion;  
I burn in the flames of separation.  
O King of life, lift up the veil hiding Thy Face,  
That the skies may resplend with Thy light.  
O Lord of the Testament! O King of the Covenant!  
O Thou by Whose fire the Sinai of the Pledge hath been lit!  
O Thou Whose name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá! For Thee  
The flags of Guidance have been unfurled:  
Thou art the Dayspring of the Divine mysteries;  
Thou art the Wellspring of the Divine signs.  
O mighty King of Kings, as an *Alif*,<sup>4</sup>  
Thou risest above the Cause of God,  
In Thy servitude, submissive as a *Bih*,<sup>5</sup>  
At the gate of the garden of the Lord of Bahá.  
O Most Great Branch of the Tree of the Cause!  
O Twig sprouted from the Ancient Essence!  
Thou art the spring of God's inspiration! Thou  
Illuminest the eyes of the people of Bahá!  
Bestow a drop of kindness on this puny bird,  
Restless and impatient in his remoteness from Thee!  
In this Day, O King of the Kingdom of the heart,  
My breast burneth in its separation from Thee.  
I'm ablaze, O my King, with the fire of exclusion,  
In this wilderness of yearning and seclusion.  
Set free this bird from the snare of anguish,  
O King of grace and Sovereign of bounty!  
Look not at my merits or worth,  
Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Persian text is published in Afnan, “Taḍmín Mathnaví Jináb-i-Rúḥu’lláh Varqá” 225-226.
- <sup>2</sup> The translators thank Mrs. Faraneh Vargha-Khadem for having sent them the text of the poem and encouraged them to translate it into English.
- <sup>3</sup> A reference to Koran 7:172. According to Koranic spiritual exegesis, this verse alludes to a primal metahistorical event, when human souls enjoyed a mysterious existence in God before time was created. In that station before time, God put the question, “Am I not (*Alast*) your Lord?,” and received from the souls the immediate and joyful answer: “Yes, we testify.” In that moment humankind undersigned, so to say, an eternal Covenant with its Lord, Whom it promised to recognize however and wherever He would manifest Himself, ready to accept the consequences of any eventual disloyalty.
- <sup>4</sup> *Alif* is the first letter of the Persian alphabet and it has the form of a vertical straight line |.
- <sup>5</sup> *Bih* is the second letter of the Persian alphabet and it has the form of an horizontal curved line ب.
- <sup>6</sup> This verse is by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, see *Majmú’ih* 13:411-2, verse 7.



# The Mathnaví by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá, the Martyr: A Few Notes on Its Historical Context and Poetical Content

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

## Abstract

A tentative translation of the Mathnaví by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá, the martyr, is presented [above]. It is accompanied by a concise commentary of the content of his poem. After a few words on the mathnaví in Persian literature, the most important images presented in the poem are briefly explained: the motif of the cup-bearer and the cup, springtime motifs, love motifs. The poem is a hymn of love to the Blessed Beauty. However, in the final 10 verses after verse 31 the poet turns to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and it closes his eulogy with a quotation of a verse from one of the Master's poems (Ay Khudáy-i-Pur-'Aṭáy-i-Dhu'l-Manán), a rhetorical device called *Taḍmín*.

While describing the lives and martyrdom of Mírzá 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá and of his son Rúḥu'lláh, Adib Taherzadeh wrote: "Truly, Rúḥu'lláh was no ordinary child. He was an inspired being and acted as a spiritual giant. At a young age he wrote beautiful poetry which clearly demonstrates how deep was his love for Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, how vast his knowledge of the Faith and how profound his understanding of the real purpose of life" [*Revelation* 4:60]. These qualities clearly emerge from the verses of the

*mathnaví* composed by this young hero, whose first English translation is being presented in this paper.

## The *mathnaví* in Persian literature

Edward G. Browne (1862-1926), the renowned British Orientalist, defines the *mathnaví* ‘narrative poem in doublets’ [*Literary History* 1:18] and describes it as ‘the most ancient essentially Persian verse form... [after the quatrain or *rubá’í*] where the rhyme changes in each couplet’ [ibid. 473]. *Mathnavís* have been written in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish and Urdu cultures. Johannes Thomas Pieter de Bruijn, Professor Emeritus of Persian at the University of Leiden, explains that ‘the Persians call it *mathnawí* because each line requires two rhyming letters... Etymologically, it is often explained as a *nisba* adjective to the Arabic word *mathná*, “two by two”...’. The most important features of the *mathnaví* may be summarized as follows:

**Length:** de Bruijn explains that ‘In principle, there were no limits to the length of a *mathnawí*... [with the exception of Firdawsí’s *Sháh-Námih*<sup>1</sup> and Rúmi’s *Mathnawíy-ma’nawí*], most of the better-known poems fall within a range of 2,000 to 9,000 *bayts*, but the form was also used for texts of a much lesser extent. Fragments of no more than a few lines with the rhyme scheme of the *mathnawí* can be found as inserted lines in prose works’.

**Rhyme:** In this poetic composition ‘each hemistich rhymes with its companion and each verse has a new rhyme’ [Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana” 356], and thus its classic rhyme scheme is *aa bb cc*, etc. ‘Other poems were occasionally inserted into a *mathnawí* text, either with or without the use of their specific rhyme scheme ... Prose and poetry were in some cases used alternatively’ [de Bruijn].

**Metre:** It is ‘written in a restricted number of metres. These metres always have eleven or, more rarely, ten syllables...’ [de Bruijn].

**Narrative syntax:** ‘The narrative syntax of almost all the Persian *mathnavís* remains essentially paratactic, like that of the language [“Letteratura neopersiana” 365].

**Contents:** It ‘is used in extensive narratives and long stories which cannot easily be treated of in poems with one specific rhyming

letter...' [de Bruijn]. Its genres 'are not restricted to the heroic, the romantic and the didactic, the three usually associated with this verse form. Panegyrics and satire, topical events, love and wine, and many others subjects could also be dealt with in a *mathnaví* ... During the later Middle Ages, new subjects were added to the répertoire of the narrative *mathnaví*... At the same time, mystical poems continuing the examples set by Saná'í, 'Aṭṭār and Djalál al-Dín Rúmí proliferated' [de Bruijn].

According to Bausani the *mathnaví* had lost its expressive power in the last centuries. He wrote:

And thus, the *maṣnaví* also has arrived on the threshold of the contemporary age offering, together with a number of naive religious poem in "popular" style — usually despised ... — mystic-symbolic poems, wholly inadequate to our modern world as well as theoretical and didactic meditations which the modern world conceives only as written in prose. This makes us understand that in the contemporary Iran the *maṣnaví* is condemned to a radical decline, perhaps more than the other forms of traditional poetry. [ibid. 439]

However, the *mathnaví* we are presenting seems to contradict Bausani's judgment, since it is rich in inspiration and uses with great mastery "the motifs, images and metaphors" of the ancient and glorious Persian poems.

Moreover, the *mathnaví* seems to have been especially appreciated by the Bábis and Bahá'ís. Franklin Lewis, an expert in Persian Language and Literature, especially Rúmí, remarks in this regard:

There is... a *mathnaví* written in praise of Bahá'u'lláh attributed to Táhirih. Whether this poem is indeed hers or not, it is clear that the *mathnaví* was a form appreciated by many of the Bábis and, later on, by Iranian Bahá'ís... Nabíl-i Zarandí, author of the *Dawn-Breakers*, after completing his pilgrimage to the House of the Báb in Shiraz as per Bahá'u'lláh's instructions in the *Súriy-i Hajj*, composed a *mathnaví* describing the experience. Nabíl also composed another *mathnaví* describing the history of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Both of Nabíl's *mathnavís* seem to derive their

inspiration from Bahá'u'lláh's own *Mathnaví-i Mubárák*.  
 ["Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví-i Mubárák*" 113]

## The language of Rúḥu'lláh Varqá's *mathnaví*

Although *mathnavís* are not considered lyrical works, still the four major themes of Persian lyrical poetry as described by Bausani, that is "wine, love, springtime and mystics" ["Letteratura neopersiana" 176], occupy a central position in this poem by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá. Associated with springtime motifs are many nature tropes. Also theological and scriptural motifs are widely used in this poem. Last but not least, there also are didactic themes.

### *The cup-bearer*

Immediately in verse 1 we find the figure of the cupbearer and the cup. The cup-bearer also is mentioned in verse 19 and 21. This poem has the form *Sáqí-namih*, often translated "The Book of the Cup-Bearer", whose main personage is a mysterious *sáqí*, who according to many Iranists is "an initiator to the mysteries of wine and love" [Saccone, "Prefazione" 216 n1]. A famous example is the *Sáqí-namih* by Ḥáfiz, translated The Book of the Cup-bearer. William L. Hanaway, Emeritus Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (Persian) University of Pennsylvania remarks:

*sáqí* – cup-bearer, the person charged with pouring wine... Physical beauty was important in the choice of individuals to be wine servers. Bayhaqí [famous Persian historian of the 5th/11th century] describes festive occasions when the *sáqís*, whom he calls *máhrúyán* "moon-faced", would appear splendidly attired and attract the amorous glances of courtiers. These characteristics of the *sáqí*, sc. being a Turk, military training, exceptional beauty, and closeness to the ruler, help explain the image of the *sáqí* as it developed in poetry after the 5th/11th century. ["*Sáqí*: In Persian Usage"]

This familiar personage of Persian mystic poetry has his origin in the Koran and in the traditions. Carlo Saccone, an expert in and a translator of Persian poetry into Italian, comprising the whole *Díván*

by Khájih Shamsu'd-Dín Muḥammad Ḥáfiz-i-Shírází (ca. 1318-1390), writes that “the wine which he, incessantly invoked and implored, pours into the cup of the lover/poet clearly reveals its sacred *imprinting*, i.e., it is a transposition of the ‘mysterious’ wine which the youthful cup-bearers of Muslim paradise offer to the blessed spirits” [“Sensi e soprasensi” 44].

Bausani explains that the Sufis relate the cup-bearer to ‘the ancient mystic legend wherefore at the beginning of the Divine Love, the cup-bearer (*sáqí*), as God-the Beloved, poured the wine for God-the Lover during forty successive dawns and thus he created the world’ [‘Letteratura neopersiana’ 162; see *Religion in Iran* 277]. Sufis also relate the motifs of the cup-bearer, wine and drunkenness to the *rúz-i-alast*, the metahistorical morning when human souls entered into the eternal Covenant with their Creator, which is the basis of their life on earth and of the development of human civilization [see HW Persian no. 19]. According to the German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003), the Sufis

saw this moment in poetical imagery as a spiritual banquet in which the wine of Love was distributed to humanity so that everyone received the share which he or she will have in this life. Here, the imagery of wine is used not for the final goal of the mystic’s unification with God and his being filled with Him, but rather as the starting point of the flow of Divine grace at the beginning of time. [*Deciphering* 109]

Finally, according to Saccone, the cup-bearer sometimes symbolizes the Beloved himself, as

an initiator, i.e., he who ... initiates the poet ... into the mysteries of wine and love for him [God]. [And the poet’s] initiation ... is essentially a summon to folly, to disarm one’s intellect and its analytic processes, because the lover will attain unto the reunion with his friend ... only in the condition of ‘sacred folly,’ fostered by his drunkenness. [“Sensi e soprasensi” 49, 50]

Bahá'u'lláh mentions the *Sáqí* in at least three of His poems, *Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá*, *Sáqí bi-dih ábí*, and *Sáqí bi-dih án jám* [see Ishráq Khávarí, *Má'idíy-i-Asmání* 4:176-211].

### *The cup*

The image of the cup is associated with the image of the cup-bearer. The symbolic meanings of the words denoting a “cup” have been commented upon at length by many writers. Saná'í and 'Aṭṭār see it as a symbol of the human heart, and Gnostic thinkers as the Knowing Soul (*nafs-i-dáná*), that is a human soul which having been purified has become crystal-clear. Ḥáfiz says that the cup is the “intimate illuminating soul of the Friend.” “Cup” in Persian is also called *paymáníh*, a word resembling *paymán*, which means covenant. Therefore the two concepts are often used together in a play on words [see Bausani, *Religion in Iran* 262]. In the Muslim world, Covenant especially means the Covenant between God and man. If man submits to the laws of God, God in His turn will purify his soul, and will enable him to grow spiritually. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, an Italian Catholic Biblicist, theologian, archaeologist and Hebraist explains the meaning of the symbol of the cup in the Hebrew world:

Although the cup is a liturgical element (especially in Easter Judaic and Eucharistic rites), it becomes a relevant symbol to denote the destiny of a person, because of the idea that a cup contains a certain amount of liquid. We thus have the cup of salvation [Psalms 116:13] and especially that of the divine judgment, the cup of fury [Isaiah 51:17-22], which also is a sign of death ... [500 *curiosità* 47]

As has been said, Rúḥu'lláh mentions the Cupbearer in three verses:

Fill up the wine-cup, O Cupbearer, to the brim;  
By Thy liquor, set the Sinai of the heart on fire. [1]

O Cupbearer! Kindly proffer the cup of Thy gifts,  
That I may be cleansed from crimes and faults. [19]

Hail, O Cupbearer at the eternal banquet,  
Graciously pour a wine drop on this dust,

That these patterns may be brightened by Thy bounty,  
That we may be sacrificed for the One Beloved. [20-1]

Who else is this Cupbearer, this heavenly Person, if not Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Beloved *par excellence*. And what else is His wine, if not His soul-entrancing Word? Bahá'u'lláh kindles the fire of love in the poet's heart. And since this poet responds to His offer, He cleanses his heart "from crimes and faults." He prepares it to the highest proof of love: offering his life on the path of service.

### *Springtime motifs*

In our poem, the Anacreontic themes, strictly connected with mystical themes, easily turn into springtime motifs. And the young poet speaks of "the rose-garden of the spirit (*gulshan-i-ján*)," of "the scent of the Loved One (*búy-i-Dúst*)," of a "breeze (*násím*)," and of "soul-stirring scented breathes (*mu'aṭṭar nafḥih-háy-i-jánfazá*)."

In the Bahá'í Writings springtime has mostly been associated to the days of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad from 22 April to 3 May 1863:

*The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching. Bestir thyself, and magnify, before the entire creation, the name of God, and celebrate His praise, in such wise that all created things may be regenerated and made new. Speak, and hold not thy peace. The day star of blissfulness shineth above the horizon of Our name, the Blissful, inasmuch as the kingdom of the name of God hath been adorned with the ornament of the name of thy Lord, the Creator of the heavens. Arise before the nations of the earth, and arm thyself with the power of this Most Great Name, and be not of those who tarry.* [GWB 27, sec. XIV, ¶1, Lawḥ-i-Riḍván]

Bahá'u'lláh also writes about springtime in other Tablets:

*Seize the time, therefore, ere the glory of the divine springtime hath spent itself, and the Bird of Eternity ceased to warble its melody, that thy inner hearing may not be deprived of hearkening unto its call.* [KI 24, ¶23]

*It behoveth you to refresh and revive your souls through the gracious favours which in this Divine, this soul-stirring Springtime are being showered upon you. [TB 86, Lawḥ-i-Dunyá]*

An evidence of His bonds with springtime also is present in a prayer He wrote while He was confined in the citadel of ‘Akká:

*Glory to Thee, O my God! The first stirrings of the spring of Thy grace have appeared and clothed Thine earth with verdure. The clouds of the heaven of Thy bounty have rained their rain on this City within whose walls is imprisoned Him Whose desire is the salvation of Thy creatures. Through it the soil of this City hath been decked forth, and its trees clothed with foliage, and its inhabitants gladdened. [PM 199, sec. 117, ¶1]*

The image of springtime as the beginning of a new Dispensation is a typical feature of the Writings and talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who, while dealing with progressive revelation, described the advent of the new Manifestation of God as a new springtime:

*Soon the whole world, as in springtime, will change its garb. The turning and falling of the autumn leaves is past; the bleakness of the winter time is over. The new year hath appeared and the spiritual springtime is at hand. The black earth is becoming a verdant garden; the deserts and mountains are teeming with red flowers; from the borders of the wilderness the tall grasses are standing like advance guards before the cypress and jessamine trees; while the birds are singing among the rose branches like the angels in the highest heavens, announcing the glad-tidings of the approach of that spiritual spring, and the sweet music of their voices is causing the real essence of all things to move and quiver. [TAB2 318-9]*

Echoes of these words must have come to the ears of Rúḥu’lláh, who implicitly relates these springtime motifs with the “Day of the Covenant (*Yawm-i-Míthaq*).”

From the rose-garden of the spirit, I’ll inhale the scent of the  
Loved One;  
From the abode of the Beloved, I’ll come back like a  
breeze,



With soul-stirring scented breaths,  
 With blessed and cheerful glad-tidings.

I proclaim to my travelling companions: Hasten,  
 O my friends! The Day of the Covenant hath come!

### *Love motifs*

The whole poem is a hymn of love, not only for Bahá'u'lláh but also for 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The first part of the poem conveys the deep love of the poet for the "Loved One (*Dúst*)," the "Beloved (*Dúst*)" and the "Adored One (*Dúst*)": he summons his readers to "assist and help" His Cause, to teach His Faith, that it "may shine above all the regions of the earth." If they want to be worthy of such an honor, they should "move away from fancies and doubts," "the thorns of their hearts" should become "roses;" they should be assured that "The Lord of Creation will come to... [their] rescue." But most of all they should be "on fire in the desert of exclusion," and "burn in the flames of separation," so that they may be ready to offer their lives on His path.

### *The end of the poem*

From verse 31 the poet turns to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The special love that Rúḥu'lláh had for 'Abdu'l-Bahá reflected the same love that flourished in his father after an episode described by Adib Taherzadeh as follows:

Once Bahá'u'lláh spoke to Varqá [Rúḥu'lláh's father] about the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and extolled His virtues and heavenly qualities. He said that in this world of being there was a phenomenon which He had referred to in some Tablets as the 'Most Great Elixir'. Any person who possessed this power would be able to exert enormous influence in the world through his work and could do anything he desired... And now, look at the Master. Observe with what patience and compassion He dealt with all types of people. He possessed this power, therefore immeasurable was the extent of the influence He would exert upon the world of humanity.

When Varqá heard this, he was so filled with joy and excitement that he fell prostrate at Bahá'u'lláh's feet and begged Him to make it possible for him and one of his sons to lay down their lives in the path of the Master. Bahá'u'lláh favoured him with His acceptance. When he returned to Persia, Varqá wrote to Bahá'u'lláh and renewed his plea for martyrdom, a plea to which He again favourably responded. And... this happened; he was martyred during the Ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. [*Revelation* 4:56-7]

Rúḥu'lláh describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His glory, erect "as an *Alif*," and in His utter submission to the Will of God, 'submissive as a *bih*." This use of the Arabic alphabet is not uncommon in the verses of the mystic Persian poets. For example Shamsu'd-Dín Ḥáfiz (ca. 1318-1390) writes:

On my heart's tablet is naught save the (straight) alif... of  
the Friend's stature:

What may I do? Me, recollection of other letter the teacher  
(the murshid) gave not. [*Díván* 703, no. 416, v.8]

The verses addressed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá are 10. And they end with a *taḍmín*,<sup>2</sup> a quotation of a verse by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself:

Look not at my merits or worth,

Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord. [*Majmú'ih* 13:411-2, verse  
7; provisional translation by the authors]

The whole poem may be inadequately rendered in English as follows:

He is God.

O God of all graces and Lord of all bounties,

Who knowest my heart, my secrets, and my soul!

Every morning Thou art the Companion of my soul.

Thou knowest my anguish and my distress.

Fastened to Thy remembrance, this heart

Only Thy angst as a companion longs for.

Perish the heart which does not burn for Thee!

Be blinded the eye that does not cry for Thee!  
 O Almighty, in this darksome night,  
 in my heart Thy remembrance is a glowing lamp.  
 Upon my heart breathe the breath of life, by Thy bounty,  
 That non-existence, by Thy grace, into eternity may turn.  
 Look not at my merits or worth,  
 Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord.  
 Upon these broken-winged birds,  
 By Thy benevolence, new wings bestow.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

At the end of our perusal of this *Mathnaví*, we can but express our astonishment and awe in front of this twelve-year-old boy, who demonstrated through his verses and much more his behavior, that not only he had preserved his heart as a mirror “*upon which no dust has fallen*”, as that of a child, but that he also had acquired most of “*the divine perfections latent in the heart of man*” [PUP 72, ¶2, 73, ¶4].

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi Tusi (c. 940-1020), the greatest Persian epic poet.

<sup>2</sup> *Taḍmín*: “inserting the verses of another in one’s own poem” (Steingass 306), that is quoting a “very famous verse of another poet” (Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana,” p. 178).

<sup>3</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Majmú'ih* 13:208; see also *Aḏhkáru'l-Muqarrabín* 2:135. A provisional translation by Mardani and Savi.

# The Countenance of the Blessed Beauty in the Mirror of Mawlúd<sup>1</sup> Tablets

Foad Seddigh

## Introduction

Historically, the commemoration of the anniversary of the birth of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh was celebrated in the East over two consecutive days according to the lunar calendar on the first and second of Muḥarram,<sup>2</sup> and in the West on October 20 and November 12, according to the Gregorian calendar respectively. Since B.E. 172 (2015), in accordance with the call of the Universal House of Justice, these two Holy Days have been celebrated globally in a uniform fashion, over two consecutive days, based on the provisions of the Badí' calendar. According to a procedure set in place by the Universal House of Justice and intended to harmonize the lunar and solar dates celebrated previously, the twin Holy Days will be celebrated on the "first and second day following the occurrence of the eighth new moon after Naw-Rúz", resulting in the twin Birthdays being commemorated somewhere between mid-October to mid-November depending on the specific year in question. This clarification by the Universal House of Justice follows the pronouncement by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the Epistle of Questions and Answers that these two days are considered as one day in sight of God.<sup>3</sup>

During this year when the world-wide Bahá'í community celebrates the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh, we have the bounty

of receiving a priceless gift offered by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í world, namely the book *Days of Remembrance*.<sup>4</sup> This book contains the translation into English of Tablets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for Holy days. In particular this compilation contains six Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed for the occasion of the twin Holy Days, two Tablets for the Birth of the Báb and four Tablets relating to His own personage. These Tablets are as follows:

### **For the Birth of The Báb:**

1. Tablet no. 40. "*In the name of the One born on this day...*" [pp. 199 - 201]
2. Tablet no. 41. "*He is the Eternal, the One, the Single.*" [pp. 202 - 204]

### **For the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh:**

3. Tablet no. 42. Lawḥ-i-Mawlúd (Tablet of the Birth) [pp. 207 - 212]
4. Tablet no. 43. "*He is the Most Holy, the Most Exalted ...*" [pp. 213 - 215]
5. Tablet no. 44. "*He is God. O concourse of ardent lovers ...*" [pp. 216 - 219]
6. Tablet no. 45. "*He is the Most Holy ... This is the month...*" [pp. 220 - 221]

Tablets are numbered in the above list according to the same numbers utilized in the book *Days of Remembrance*.

The author of this paper has not been able to identify any Tablet which the Báb specifically revealed for His own birth. The reason for this could have been His intention to minimize its importance, that the focus of the people be on the impending advent of "Him Whom God shall make manifest"; an exalted being to Whom He referred as "Remnant of God" in His first and mightiest work "Qayyúmu'l-Asmá":<sup>5</sup>

*O THOU Remnant of God! I have sacrificed myself wholly for Thee; I have accepted curses for Thy sake, and have yearned for naught but martyrdom in the path of Thy love. Sufficient witness unto me is God, the Exalted, the Protector, the Ancient of Days. [SWB 59]*

In Traveller's Narrative, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts:

*Now what He intended by the term Báb [Gate] was this, that He was the channel of grace from some great Person still behind the veil of glory, Who was the possessor of countless and boundless perfections, by Whose will He moved, and to the bond of Whose love He clung. [TN 4]*

The Báb states:

*For all that hath been exalted in the Bayán is but as a ring upon My hand, and I Myself am, verily, but a ring upon the hand of Him Whom God shall make manifest – glorified be His mention! He turneth it as He pleaseth, for whatsoever He pleaseth, and through whatsoever He pleaseth. He, verily, is the Help in Peril, the Most High. [SWB 168]*

A.L.M. Nicolas,<sup>6</sup> who greatly admired the Báb, produced one of the most extensive early translations of some of His Writings. He thought that Bahá'ís reduced the Báb to the mere figure of a herald for the advent of Bahá'u'lláh, not knowing that the Báb's ardent desire was to sacrifice Himself and His religion for the coming of the New Age and the advent of coming of Bahá'u'lláh.

Returning to the discussion regarding the two Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed for the anniversary of the birth of the Báb, we notice that only a few lines are devoted to the birth of the Báb in each Tablet; a major part of each Tablet is about the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, very much in accordance with the desire of the Báb Himself.

Manifestations of God have three identities. The first one is a physical identity which has a beginning and an end; it starts with the birth of the manifestation of God and ends at the time of his passing away. This body will be reduced to dust like the body of other human

beings after their death. Manifestations of God are subject to all manners of physical limitations such as disease, fatigue and hunger like other human beings. The second identity is their human soul which is the rational soul, having a beginning and no end – this is why prophet Muḥammad in the Qur’án says I am a human being like you.<sup>7</sup> The third identity is the Great Spirit of God reflected within them which has no beginning and no end. This is the Reality which brings to them the Knowledge of what has been and what will be. This is true for all Manifestations of God, and this Reality has existed from the beginning, even before their births. As discussed later in this paper, according to a statement by Bahá’u’lláh, the significance of the birth of a Manifestation of God, say that of the Báb or Bahá’u’lláh, is association of this eternal and everlasting Spirit with a body which is borne and in due course would declare the advent of a new age. As regards the time of declaration for their Mission, Bahá’u’lláh quoting the Báb in the Kitáb-i-Badí‘ states that as soon as a person is ready to receive the Message, it will not be delayed even by a fraction of a second.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the limitation of space in this paper, a brief review of four Tablets in the compilation is undertaken, namely Tablets number 41, 43, 44 and 45; and a more detailed discussion of two of the Tablets carried out, i.e. Tablets number 40 and 42.

Also in this paper, due to space limitation, we will not discuss matters related to the physical and human aspect of the births of the twin Manifestations of God, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.

## **A Summary of Contents of Four Tablets**

### **1. Second Tablet in the list of six Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh (Tablet no. 41 in the Book; pp. 202 – 204)**

This Tablet is revealed for the anniversary of the birth of the Báb. The Tablet starts with its title invoking the names and attributes of God, with its opening lines giving praise unto God for adorning the world with the advent of the Báb the anniversary of Whose birth is being celebrated and Who Heralded the Revelation of the supreme Lordship of God; and it asks God to assist those who cry out amidst the peoples of the world for the Glorification of the Name of God. It



observes that the “*Lord of all mankind*” is imprisoned in the Most Great Prison (Akka), calling aloud the Name of God. Bahá’u’lláh then declares that despite His captivity in the hands of men, the light of His power shines resplendent – and furthermore, He asserts that the power of the enemies of God cannot prevail over Him and is incapable of frustrating Him. He implores God for the victory of those who have arisen to serve Him and beseeches God to make them become triumphant over the enemies of His God and to become steadfast in the Cause of God. Towards the end of the Tablet, a prayer is revealed for the recipient of the Tablet to recite.

## 2. Fourth Tablet in the list of six Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh (Tablet no. 43 in the Book, p. 213 – 215)

This Tablet is revealed for the anniversary of the birth of Bahá’u’lláh. The Tablet starts with its title invoking the names and attributes of God, with its opening line proclaiming that the birthday festival has come. In the Tablet He says, “*He Who is the Beauty of God, the All-Powerful, the All-Compelling, the All-Loving, hath ascended His throne.*” Continuing, Bahá’u’lláh says that He celebrates this festival in the Most Great Prison at a time when the kings and rulers of the world had arisen against Him. Referring to Himself as the “*quintessence of assurance*”, Bahá’u’lláh says that this has not disturbed Him. He says that in this day (day of His birth) the “*choice wine hath been unsealed.*” Normally, we associate this phrase with the declaration of His Mission, but He pronounces it for the occasion of His birth. He counsels the people of Bahá to soar upon the wings of detachment into the atmosphere of the love of their Lord. Then He goes on to say: “*It behoveth you to arise and acquaint the people with that which hath been sent down in the Book of their Lord, the Almighty, the Unconstrained. Say: Fear ye God and pay no heed to the vain imaginings of them that walk in the ways of doubt and iniquity.*” He puts forward a rhetorical question to the reader, asking whether one can be content with a mere pond whilst the Most Great Ocean is stretched out before their eyes? Bahá’u’lláh refers to Himself as the Bird of Eternity warbling upon the branches of the Divine Lote-Tree. He calls upon the people to “*renounce those who idly dispute the verses that God hath revealed, and who have disbelieved in their Lord when He came invested with proof and testimony.*”

### 3. Fifth Tablet in the list of six Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (Tablet no. 44 in the Book: pages 216 – 219)

Bahá'u'lláh revealed this Tablet for the anniversary of His Own birth. He addresses the concourse of ardent lovers and says: *“By the righteousness of God, this is a night the like of which hath never been witnessed in the world of creation,”* and *“This is the night wherein the Spirit intoned such a melody as to throw into commotion the inner realities of all men, proclaiming: ‘Rejoice, O Concourse on high, within your retreats of Paradise!’”* The realities of all men are their human qualities and human intellect. The inner realities of all men are their spiritual life and existence. Also He says: *“Whereupon did the Voice of God call out from within the Tabernacle of holiness and bounty: ‘This, indeed, is the night wherein He Who is the reality of the All-Merciful hath been born, the night wherein every eternal command hath been expounded by the Pen of the All-Glorious. Rejoice, then, with exceeding gladness, O concourse of the Bayán!’”* Then, He refers to the call of the Herald of the Spirit in the midmost heart of eternity. Further reflection may be needed to uncover the identity of this being; it might be the Báb, or might be someone or something else. This Being says: *“By God! The musk-scented wine hath been unsealed by the mighty hand of Him Who is the source of sovereignty and power. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.”* and *“cups of crimson-coloured wine are being borne round by the hand of the divine Joseph and raised to the beauty of the All-Glorious. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.”*

Then Bahá'u'lláh addresses the concourse of men to come forward and drink their fill from this everlasting life. Then He continues on to say: *“O assemblage of true lovers! The beauty of the Desired One hath shone forth in its naked glory. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful. O concourse of His loved ones! The countenance of the Best-Beloved hath dawned above the horizon of holiness. Bestir yourselves and hasten unto it with all your hearts, O people of the Bayán! And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.”* He states that the proof has been fulfilled and testimonies are established and resurrection has come to pass through the appearance of the Manifestation of God. Then He announces: *“The ages have passed,*

*and the cycles have been stirred up, and every luminary hath beamed with delight, for God hath shed the splendour of His glory upon every tree adorned with verdant twigs. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.”* He calls upon His lovers to “*Bestir yourselves, O chosen ones of God, for the spirits have been gathered together, the divine breezes have wafted, the fleeting fancies have been dispelled, and the voices of eternity have rung out from every flourishing tree. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.*” Bahá’u’lláh then states that the veils have been burned away, and the clouds are rent asunder, signs have been revealed and allusions were unravelled by Him. He says: “*Let your hearts be filled with joy, but conceal this closely guarded, this most hidden secret, lest the stranger become apprised of that which ye have quaffed of the wine that imparteth rapture and delight. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.*” Bahá’u’lláh then reminds the people of the Bayán that “*God beareth Me witness that His favour is complete, His mercy is perfected, and His countenance is beaming with joy and radiance. And this, verily, is from the grace of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Bountiful.*” Finally as the Tablet draws to a close, He encourages His companions to drink their fill from the sparkling luminous streams which are provided for them from the grace of God.

#### **4. Sixth Tablet in the list of six Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh** (Tablet no. 45 in the Book, pp. 220 – 221)

This short Tablet which has come under the category of the Tablets for the anniversary of the birth of the Twin Manifestations, is not for the day of birth, rather for the month of the birth which should be regarded as the month of Muḥarram in the lunar year. The month of Muḥarram is the first month of the year in the lunar calendar. It is also the month of mourning for the Shí’ah, since one of the most revered persons in this sect of Islam, Imám Ḥusayn, grandson of Prophet Muḥammad, was martyred on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of this month. Key points in this Tablet are listed in bullet form below. Whenever extracts from the Tablet are used, they are placed in quotation marks:

- The Tablet starts with names and attributes of God.

- In reference to this month wherein Bahá'u'lláh was borne, He refers to it as a month through which all other months were illumined and refers to Himself as:
  - “He Who beareth the Most Great Name,”
  - “Whose appearance hath caused the limbs of humankind to quake,”
  - “and the dust of Whose footsteps the Concourse on high and the dwellers of the cities of names have sought for a blessing.”
  - “Whereupon they rendered praise unto God and cried out in joy and exultation.”
  - “He Who is the Hidden Secret and the Well-guarded Treasure hath been made manifest and hath called aloud amidst all humankind.”
  - “All dominion belongeth to this newborn Child through Whom”:
    - “the face of creation hath been wreathed in smiles,”
    - “the trees have swayed,”
    - “and the oceans have surged,”
    - “and the mountains have taken flight,”
    - “and Paradise hath lifted its voice,”
    - “and the Rock hath cried out,”
    - All things have exclaimed, “O concourse of creation! Hasten ye towards the dawning-place of the countenance of your Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate”!
- This is the month wherein:
  - “Paradise itself was decked forth with the splendours of the countenance of its Lord,”
  - “The heavenly Nightingale warbled its melody upon the Divine Lote-Tree,”
  - “The hearts of the favoured ones were filled with rapture.”
  - “But alas, the people, for the most part, are heedless.”
  - “Blessed be the one who hath recognized Him.”
  - “Woe betide him that hath turned aside from the One upon Whom the Concourse on high have fixed their gaze, Him Who hath confounded every wayward misbeliever.”

Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the recipient of the Tablet to intone with sweetest melodies this prayer:

*Praise be to Thee, O my most merciful Lord, for remembering me in this Tablet whereby the fragrance of the garment of Thy knowledge was diffused and the oceans of Thy grace were made to surge. I bear witness that Thou art potent to do as Thou pleasest. No God is there but Thee, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.*

## Detailed Study of Tablets Number 40 and 42

The commentary that follows reflects the author's own understanding and therefore is not intended to suggest that these are the only meanings of the passages considered.

### Explanation of Some Words and Phrases in the Tablet Number 40:

*Herald of His name:*

The name in this Tablet means Bahá, and the Herald of His name is simply the Báb.

*This is a Tablet We have addressed **unto that night** wherein the heavens and the earth were illumined by a Light that cast its radiance over the entire creation.*

**'The night'** is the night of the birth of the Báb. In this night the whole world after being in spiritual darkness for some time became illumined and this light is the light of Guidance emanating from the Countenance of the Báb.

*O night! For through thee was born the Day of God, a Day which We have ordained to be the lamp of salvation unto the denizens of the cities of names*

The Day of God is a reference to a time in the future mentioned in the past prophecies. This Day belongs to God and will not be followed by night. In this quote several allusions are made. The first

one is a reference to the Day of God which we will discuss in more detail. The second one is that the “Day of God” was born or started with the birth of the Báb and not by the time of the declaration of His mission. And finally this Day is like a lamp which provides Guidance to the people of this world.

## Day of God

In the past Scriptures numerous references were made to the **Day of God** meaning that there will be a time when God or the Lord of all mankind will rule the entire creation, or the Father Himself will come. In the space appearing below, three such references are given from the Bible and several more are listed in the notes.<sup>9</sup>

*Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him. And, recompense for his work He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. [Isaiah 40: 10 & 11]*

*The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low. [Isaiah 2: 11 & 12]*

*Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him.*

*He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. [Psalms 50: 3 & 4]*

Many references to “meeting God” appear in the Qur’án. One reference is given below and several more references are given in the notes.<sup>10</sup>

*And they say: When we are lost in the earth, how can we then be re-created? Nay but they are disbelievers in the meeting with their Lord. [Surih As-Sajda 32:10]*

In the Bahá'í Writings there are numerous references to the Day of God, making it impracticable to be quoted in a limited space. Therefore, we will quote only one reference below:

*Say: This is the Day of God Himself; fear ye God and be not of them that have disbelieved in Him. Cast the idle tales behind your backs and behold My Revelation through Mine eyes.... Arise thou to serve the Cause of thy Lord; then give the people the joyful tidings concerning this resplendent Light whose revelation hath been announced by God through His Prophets and Messengers. Admonish everyone moreover to observe prudence as ordained by Him, and in the Name of God advise them, saying: It behoveth every one in this Day of God to dedicate himself to the teaching of the Cause with utmost prudence and steadfastness. [TB 241]*

\* \* \*

*Immeasurably exalted is God, the Maker of the heavens, Who hath caused this Day to speak forth **that Name** whereby the veils of idle fancy have been rent asunder, the mists of vain imaginings have been dispelled, and His name "**the Self-Subsisting**" hath dawned above the horizon of certitude.*

In the above phrase, "**that Name**" is Bahá which has caused the veils of idle fancy and vain imaginings to be torn and disappear.

In the Bahá'í Writings "**Self-Subsisting**" is the name and title of Bahá'u'lláh. Self-Subsisting is one of the names of God which means "a Being" Who causes others to stand up while He Himself does not need the support of anyone else. The name of God: "Self-Subsisting" appears three times in the Qur'án and in all three cases, it is joined with the attribute of "Living."<sup>11</sup>

*Through Thee the choice wine of **everlasting life** hath been unsealed, the doors of knowledge and utterance have been unlocked before the peoples of the earth.*

In this phrase, "**everlasting life**" is the spiritual life which can only be given to anyone by the Manifestation of God for today. This everlasting life is likened to a choice wine which had been sealed for

ages and is now opened before the eyes of men, offering them to drink their fill.

*All glory be to that hour wherein **the Treasure of God**, the All-Powerful, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, **hath appeared!***

Bahá'u'lláh was the “hidden Treasure of God” Who has now appeared. This reminds us of the promise of the Báb to Mullá Ḥusayn that he will find “the hidden secret of God” and “the Hidden Treasure of God” in Ṭihrán before he left Shíráz for the fulfillment of his mission. He found Bahá'u'lláh in Ṭihrán.

*O concourse of earth and heaven! **This is that first night**, which God hath made to be **a sign of that second night**.*

The first night of the Twin Holy Days is the anniversary of the birth of the Báb which is viewed as a sign for the second night which is the anniversary of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh.

*On this night the Concourse on high celebrated the praise of their Lord, the Exalted, the Most Glorious, and the realities of the divine names extolled **Him Who is the King of the beginning and the end in this Revelation**, a Revelation through whose potency the **mountains have hastened unto Him Who is the All-Sufficing**, the Most High, and the hearts have turned towards the countenance of their Best-Beloved, and the leaves have been stirred into motion by the breezes of yearning, and the trees have raised their voices in joyful reply to the call of Him Who is the Unconstrained, and the entire earth hath trembled with longing in its desire to attain reunion with the Eternal King, and **all things have been made new by that concealed Word which hath appeared in this mighty Name**.*

There are several phrases in the above quote which require explanation:

Bahá'u'lláh is the “*King of the beginning and the end*” in this day. Manifestations of God are kings of the beginning and the end. This is due to the fact that the Spirit of God within them has no beginning



and no end. There is a Qur'anic verse which Bahá'u'lláh has quoted in His Writings and clarified its meaning. It says: "*He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things*" (Surih Al-Hadid 57:2). In this regard, Manifestations of God and in particular Bahá'u'lláh can be regarded as the sovereign and the king in the realm of the "first and last" and "the beginning and the end."

"*All things have been made new*" is a biblical reference as follows: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, ... creature, the old things are passed away, behold all things are made new..... it follows that there must have been a total change in all relations towards him*" [2 Corinthians 5:17]. In this day, by appearance of Bahá'u'lláh all things have been made new through the potency of His Name.

*O night of the All-Bountiful! In thee do We verily behold **the Mother Book**. Is it a Book, in truth, or rather a child begotten? Nay, by Myself! Such words pertain to the realm of names, whilst God hath sanctified this Book above all names. Through it the Hidden Secret and the Treasured Mystery have been revealed. Nay, by My life! All that hath been mentioned pertaineth to the realm of attributes, whereas the Mother Book standeth supreme above this. Through it have appeared the manifestations of "There is no God but God" over them all. Nay, while such things have been proclaimed to all people, in the estimation of thy Lord naught but His ear is capable of hearing them. Blessed are those that are well assured!*

Bahá'u'lláh confirms that the significance of the birth of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh is not the physical birth rather it is for their appearance in this world to become an instrument or receptacle for the Great Spirit of God and His Primal Will. Therefore the celebration also should be for the birth of such instrument and not for the physical birth.

## Explanation of Some Words and Phrases in Tablet #42

*O concourse of the seen and the unseen! Rejoice with exceeding gladness in your hearts and souls, for the night hath come for the **harvesting of the ages and the gathering***

*up of past cycles, the night wherein all days and nights were called into being and **the time preordained for this Revelation was fulfilled** at the behest of Him Who is the Lord of might and power.*

The time of the harvest is when the labourers in the field receive the benefits of their hard work after the harvest is ripe and it is the end of the season or symbolically the end of the time. Mankind has progressed through its own cycle and now is the time for the gathering of the harvest. The phrase “Gathering of the harvest” has been used a few times in the Bible in various parables including the following one:

*The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. [Matthew 13:39-41]*

*This is the night wherein **the doors of Paradise were flung open and the gates of Hell were shut fast**, the night wherein the paradise of the All-Merciful was unveiled in the midmost heart of creation.*

We normally associate a statement such as the one above with the advent of the declaration of the Manifestation of God. Reflecting on the above phrase, we realize that Bahá'u'lláh states that in the night He was born, such events took place. In other words there is very little difference between the occasion of His birth and that of the declaration His Mission.

“**Last Hour** ushered in through the power of truth”: The Hour and the Last Hour are other names for the day of resurrection which is interpreted in this occasion as the appearance and declaration of the Manifestation of God. We may note that this statement, once again, tells us that the advent of the birth of the Manifestation of God is not much different from that of His declaration.

“*This is the night round which have circled the **Nights of Power**, wherein **the angels and the Spirit have come down** bearing cups filled at the streams of Paradise*”: In the above phrase, there is a

reference to the “*Nights of Power*” wherein “*the angels and the Spirit have come down*” – a statement which is discussed below.

**Nights of Power:** Nights of Power is Islamic terminology. The “Night of Power” is the translation of the word “Laylatu’l-Qadr” which can be translated into English in a number of ways, one of which is the Night of Power. It is common belief among Muslims that the Qur’án was revealed in the month of Ramaḍán<sup>12</sup> according to the text of the Qur’án.<sup>13</sup> The commentators of the Qur’án have not been able to pin-point the particular night in Ramaḍán which may be regarded as “the Night of Power”.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, they have resorted to guesswork, according to Ḥadīth.<sup>15</sup> The reason for the reference to “nights of power”, which is stated in plural form, is that there are several nights which have been designated as the “night of power”. Some Muslims stay awake during all nights in the month of Ramaḍán, praying all night long hoping that one of them might be the night of power.

In the above verse Bahá’u’lláh says: “*This is the night round which have circled the Nights of Power ...*” We note that the “night of power” is regarded as being very holy in Islam and it has a high place in the hearts and minds of the believers. In order to convey to us the station of the night in which He was borne, Bahá’u’lláh states that the “night of power” is circling around this night. We normally circumambulate anything when we hold it dear. Symbolically, these references say that the “night of power” despite being so holy, has a very high regard for the night Bahá’u’lláh was borne to the extent that it goes around it. The expression for plural “nights of power” is that there are different opinions regarding which night of the month of Ramaḍán is the night of power.

“*the angels and the Spirit have come down*”: According to the text of the Qur’án, it is stated that in the night of power, the angels and the spirit will come down.<sup>16</sup> It is possible that the above phrase from the Tablet refers to this verse of the Qur’án. However, angels and the spirit mentioned in the Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh differ in meaning and interpretation from what Muslim scholars conclude. Angels are detached and pure souls and the spirit is the Spirit of God or the Most Great Spirit.

“*wherein every created thing was brought to life, and all the peoples of the earth were surrounded by His grace*”: One of

the signs of the time of the end or day of resurrection is that the dead in bygone ages will be brought to life. Bahá'u'lláh states that with His birth the day of resurrection came to pass. In other words the day of resurrection is associated with His birthday as well as the day of the declaration of His mission.

*This is the night wherein the limbs of **Jibt** were made to tremble, and the **Most Great Idol** fell upon the dust, and the foundations of iniquity were shattered, and **Manát** lamented in its inmost being, and the back of 'Uzzá was broken and its face blackened.*

There are a few references to some names in the above phrase which will be explained below:

**Jibt:** At this time, the Kaaba is the most revered structure in Islam located in Mecca where Muslims go to perform the rites of pilgrimage. In pre-Islamic Arabia, people were engaged in idol worship. At that time, the Kaaba contained 360 idols alone and each tribe and clan had idols of their own which were scattered all over Arabia. Jibt does not appear to be an idol. The Qur'án makes reference to Jibt only once and it is not used to reflect the name of any particular idol. Commentators of the Qur'án believe that Jibt<sup>17</sup> is a symbol of idol-worshiping and a symbol for all idols.

**“The Most Great Idol”:** In the above phrase, there is a reference to “The Most Great Idol”. Among the idol worshippers of Arabia, particularly among the Quraysh which was the clan of Prophet Muḥammad, the greatest of all idols had a name – it was referred to as “Hubal.”

We find in the Qur'án names of three idols from around the time of the Prophet Muhammad. These are: Lát, Manát and 'Uzzá,<sup>18</sup> idols, which were by far the most respected idols in Arabia at that time. In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh references two of them. Apart from these three idols, the Qur'án names five more idols from the time of the Prophet Noah and one more which was an idol of the Israelites.

Reference to idols and idol-worshiping in this dispensation has specific meaning. Bahá'u'lláh uses the term idol to refer to those who opposed the Manifestation of God in this day. Bahá'u'lláh also uses

the term idol to refer to objects of adoration which have no reality but are misrepresented. In particular, the symbol of idol worshipping is Mírzá Yaḥyá, half-brother of Bahá'u'lláh who claimed a station to which he was not entitled, and placed himself in a position of being worshipped without having the reality of the Manifestation of God within him. Apart from Mírzá Yaḥyá, everyone who challenged Bahá'u'lláh's authority belong to this category. The term idol-worshipping is also used to refer to any unworthy action which people devote their lives to; this is not much different from idol-worshiping – both of them do not have reality.

In modern times idol worship in its traditional form does not appear widespread in the form of elevating an object to the station of lordship and then proceeding to revere it, worship it and perform sacrifices for it. However, there are other kinds of idol-worshipping which are subtle: some people are consumed by their own thoughts which might be totally false but dressed in the robe of reality. People might pursue such thoughts to the extent they might become the object of all their endeavours in life and the focus of their existence.

To become engaged in the worship of one's vain-imaginings is very much like worshipping an idol knowing fully well that they have no power and no reality. Many people become engaged in such activities because they observe other people. This in fact becomes entrenched in the habits of some people and such acts become accepted as a norm and standard in the society. The Bahá'í Writings contain a number of references in this regard, including examples such as the following:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*They consider themselves to be the proponents of the Divine Unity, and all others as worshippers of idols, even though idols at least enjoy a mineral existence, whereas the idols of human thoughts and imaginations are sheer illusion and have not even the existence of stones. ‘Take ye good heed, O people of insight’. [SAQ 216]*

Bahá'u'lláh says:

*None have believed in Him except them who, through the power of the Lord of Names, have shattered the idols of their vain imaginings and corrupt desires and entered the city of certitude. [GWB 12]*

*Tear asunder, in My Name, the veils that have grievously blinded your vision, and, through the power born of your belief in the unity of God, scatter the idols of vain imitation. [GWB 142]*

*They that are the worshipers of the idol which their imaginations have carved, and who call it Inner Reality, such men are in truth accounted among the heathen [GWB 338]*

Shoghi Effendi says:

The “Most Great Idol” had at the bidding and through the power of Him Who is the Fountain-head of the Most Great Justice been cast out of the community of the Most Great Name, confounded, abhorred and broken [GPB 170].

The “Most Great Idol” is a reference to Mírzá Yaḥyá.

*Say: This is the Dawn whereat **the evil ones were debarred from approaching the realm of might and grandeur**, and wherein the hearts of such as have contended with God, the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the Unconstrained, were lacerated.*

In the above phrase, Bahá'u'lláh states that in the day He was borne, the evil ones were prevented from reaching the realm of might. The evil ones are those who tried to oppose the religion of God in this day, on whose apex lies Mírzá Yaḥyá. Other individuals who fall in this category include some of the leaders in the Bábí community, ecclesiastics and the learned divines in Islam, in particular Shí'ah, Islam. Furthermore, the above quote states that the “evil ones” were debarred from approaching the seat of grandeur. This simply may mean that they are made powerless to prevail over the Faith of God, to have ascendancy over the Faith of God and damage or destroy it, despite their utmost exertions and attempts.

A key point of emphasis is the notion that these descriptions may normally relate to the day that he declared His Mission, but also Bahá'u'lláh has attached them to the Day of His birth. This is to say that the Mission was borne in the Day of His birth, but it was hidden until the proper time arrived.

*All hail the appearance of this Spirit, through Whose potency the dead have been stirred up in their tombs and every mouldering bone brought to life!*

As discussed previously, this phrase is one of the signs of the day of resurrection.

*Through its revelation **the hand of His Will hath stretched forth from the sleeve of grandeur** and rent asunder the veils of the world by the power of His supreme, His peerless, His all-compelling and exalted sovereignty.*

When we study the life history of Moses, we notice that through the power of the Almighty, he was associated with several miracles. In one such case, we read that he put His hand in His bosom, and when He removed it, the hand was shining with bright white light. This physical description of a miracle, likely was used to reflect a deeper inner meaning. The hand of a Manifestation of God is the power, glory, guidance, light and grandeur given to Him by God and this hand is always hidden in His sleeve or also in His bosom. When He stretches it out of His sleeve, He can exhibit the power given to him. Bahá'u'lláh in the above phrase is making reference to past events which was briefly explained.

*to this Dawn whereat the Ancient Beauty hath been established upon the throne of His Name, the Almighty, the Most Great!*

The above phrase states that He was established on the throne of His Name on the Day of His birth which once again it may signify that there may be very little difference between the advent of His declaration and that of His birth in spiritual sense.

*This is the Dawn whereat was born He Who begetteth not and Who is not begotten. Well is it with him that immerseth himself beneath the ocean of inner meaning that surgeth within this utterance and discovereth the pearls of knowledge and wisdom.*

In the above phrase, it states that He Who begetteth not was borne. At first glance, there appears to be a possible contradiction here. However, upon further reflection, there is no contradiction at all. There is a verse in the Qur'án which refers to God as the Being Who begetteth not and not begotten.<sup>19</sup> Then according to this verse of the Qur'án, the being who does not beget nor is begotten is God. When Bahá'u'lláh says: "*was born He Who begetteth not and Who is not begotten,*" He is making a claim and says 'I am God'. Of course, this is not the only place that Bahá'u'lláh has made such a claim. For years, the enemies of His Cause have tried to associate this claim to falsehood and accused Bahá'ís of believing in Bahá'u'lláh Who claims to be God. This has been explained in the Bahá'í Writings more than once. However, individuals who are not fair-minded prefer to hold their positions on this matter and do not consider the Bahá'í explanation. It is true that Bahá'u'lláh has made such pronouncements. However, He has not said that He is the Essence of God. In the realm of creation, He is one of the Manifestations of God Who are representatives of God. In the first paragraph of the Kitab-i-Aqdas, He says: "*The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation*" [KA ¶1- 19].

Further, in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, Bahá'u'lláh says:

*Either thou or someone else hath said: 'Let the Súrih of Tawhíd be translated, so that all may know and be fully persuaded that the one true God begetteth not, nor is He begotten. Moreover, the Bábís believe in his (Bahá'u'lláh's) Divinity and Godhood.'*

*O Shaykh! This station is the station in which one dieth to himself and liveth in God. Divinity, whenever I mention it,*



*indicateth My complete and absolute self-effacement. This is the station in which I have no control over mine own weal or woe nor over my life nor over my resurrection .*

*O Shaykh! How do the divines of this age account for the effulgent glory which the Sadrah of Utterance hath shed upon the Son of ‘Imrán (Moses) on the Sinai of Divine knowledge? He (Moses) hearkened unto the Word which the Burning Bush had uttered, and accepted it; and yet most men are bereft of the power of comprehending this, inasmuch as they have busied themselves with their own concerns, and are unaware of the things which belong unto God. [ESW 41]*

Since Bahá'u'lláh's utterance in this regard has been mostly misunderstood, in the above phrase after making the statement: “*was born He Who begetteth not and Who is not begotten*”, He is making the pronouncement that well is it with all those who try to understand correctly the meaning of those verses and discover the true meaning of His statements in phrases such as the one above.

*Say: This is the Dawn whereat the hidden Essence and the unseen Treasure were made manifest ...*

In the above phrase, “*unseen Treasure*” and “*hidden Essence*” both have historical meanings, with both terms referring to Bahá'u'lláh. The Báb promised Mullá Ḥusayn that he would eventually find the “*unseen Treasure*”, and he found Bahá'u'lláh in Tīhrán when he started the assignment given to him by the Báb, traveling to the north and north east from Shīráz.

*the Dawn whereat **the Ancient Beauty** seized the **cup of immortality** with the hands of glory and, having first quaffed therefrom, proffered it unto all the peoples of the earth, high and low alike.*

In the above phrase the “*Ancient Beauty*” refers to Bahá'u'lláh and the “*cup of immortality*” in a literal sense is a drink which according to ancient belief and old stories would bring about immortal life. In the Bahá'í Writings, the term has a spiritual meaning. It is the faith offered by the Manifestation of God, providing eternal life.

*Say: This is the Dawn whereat **the Most Great Tree** was planted and bore its exalted and peerless fruits. By the righteousness of God! Within each fruit of this Tree there repose the seeds of a myriad melodies.*

A tree is a good metaphor to symbolize the Religion of God. Trees have many characteristics for which we can find symbolic parallels with the Religion of God. Trees grow from seeds and sapling and become large, trees go through an annual cycle, trees have leaves which move around under the action of winds, trees grow and give shade and shelter, in trees birds warble melodies, and trees give fruits, etc. For each of those characteristics, we can find a parallel in the Religion of God. The Burning bush which was a tree offers one such example. The Guardian explains this in a most beautiful passage:

Then, and only then, will the vast, the majestic process, set in motion at the dawn of the Adamic cycle, attain its consummation — a process which commenced six thousand years ago, with the planting, in the soil of the divine will, of the tree of divine revelation, and which has already passed through certain stages and must needs pass through still others ere it attains its final consummation. The first part of this process was the slow and steady growth of this tree of divine revelation, successively putting forth its branches, shoots and offshoots, and revealing its leaves, buds and blossoms, as a direct consequence of the light and warmth imparted to it by a series of progressive dispensations associated with Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and other Prophets, and of the vernal showers of blood shed by countless martyrs in their path. The second part of this process was the fruition of this tree, “that belongeth neither to the East nor to the West,” when the Báb appeared as the perfect fruit and declared His mission in the Year Sixty in the city of Shiraz. The third part was the grinding of this sacred seed, of infinite preciousness and potency, in the mill of adversity, causing it to yield its oil, six years later, in the city of Tabriz. The fourth part was the ignition of this oil by the hand of Providence in the depths and amidst the darkness of the Siyah-Chal of Tihiran a hundred years ago. The fifth, was the clothing of that flickering light, which had scarcely

penetrated the adjoining territory of Iraq, in the lamp of revelation, after an eclipse lasting no less than ten years, in the city of Baghdad. The sixth, was the spread of the radiance of that light, shining with added brilliancy in its crystal globe in Adrianople ... [MBW 50-57 153]

The Qur'án refers to this same tree in the following manner:

*Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touched it. [Surih Nur, 24:35]*

*One fruit of that Tree hath proclaimed what the **Burning Bush had proclaimed** aforetime in that hallowed and snow-white Spot, words to which Moses gave ear and which caused Him to forsake all created things and to direct His steps towards the **retreats of holiness** and grandeur. All glory, then, to that ecstasy born of God, the Almighty, the Most Exalted, the Most Great!*

*Another fruit thereof hath uttered that which enraptured Jesus and raised Him up to the heaven of manifest splendour.*

*Yet another fruit thereof hath disclosed that which captivated the heart of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, Who, carried away by the sweet accents of the Voice from on high, ascended unto the Divine Lote-Tree and heard.*

In the above passages, Bahá'u'lláh describes that the Tree of the Religion of God was planted in the night when He was borne and He describes the fruits of this tree which are past religions. The statement of Bahá'u'lláh and that of Shoghi Effendi in this regard are similar, except that the Guardian combines it with the verse from the Qur'án as stated above. By the advent of the Báb, this Tree gave some fruits whose seeds produced some oil in the mill of adversity; this oil was extracted and ignited in a symbolic lamp in the Black Pit; this lamp was Bahá'u'lláh. What is striking in the statement of

Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet of His birth is that this tree was planted when He was borne and not when He made His declaration.

*O Pen of the Most High! Write no more; for, by God, wert thou to set forth all the sweet accents of the fruits of this heavenly Tree, thou wouldst find thyself forsaken upon the earth.*

The Pen of the Most High is another expression for the heavenly spirit of Bahá'u'lláh which was engaged in the guidance of mankind. In reality Bahá'u'lláh is addressing His Own spirit to stop divulging any further Truth as people do not have capacity to understand it. In the above passage there is an allusion made to a verse of the Qur'án in which the Prophet Muḥammad is addressed in similar tone.<sup>20</sup>

*Dost thou not witness, O Pen, what a clamour the hypocrites have raised throughout the land, and what a tumult the wicked and ungodly have provoked? And this notwithstanding that thou didst reveal but an infinitesimal glimmer of the mysteries of thy Lord, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious. Glorious. Wherefore, restrain thyself and conceal from the eyes of men that which God, as a sign of His bounty, hath bestowed upon thee.*

In the above passage, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the Pen Who in fact is no one except Himself, then states that despite the fact that very little Truth is disclosed about the mysteries of God, the hypocrites have raised their objection and created trouble.

## Conclusion and Acknowledgement

Recently, the Supreme Institution offered a gift to the Bahá'í world, a compilation of Writings comprising the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in English called *Days of Remembrance*. This book, among other Tablets, includes several Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed specifically for the occasion of His birth and that of the Báb. These Tablets are reviewed in this paper.

In these Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the night of His birth stating that this is the night when gates of heaven were opened, doors of hell were closed, the promised "Hour" struck, all holy days derived

their light and sanctity from this night. He further mentions that the foundation of idol worshipping was shaken and, every smoldering bone started to move and the fingers of the Will of God came out of the robe of Glory and rent asunder the veils of existence. This is the day when Ancient Beauty established Himself on His everlasting throne. This is the day in which He “*Who neither begets nor begotten*” was born. This is the night when the Most Great Tree was planted, the Burning Bush in the snow-white Spot, the Land of unfading splendor, spoke. Towards the end of one the Tablet He says: “*Well is it with a man who submergeth himself in the sea of inner-meanings from these words thereby attaineth the pearls of knowledge and wisdom.*” The main objective of this paper was to explore the meaning of some of the expressions used in these Tablets.

## NOTES

\* The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Nabil Seddigh in preparation of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Mawlúd is an Arabic word meaning birth.

<sup>2</sup> The name of twelve lunar months, in the same order as they appear in the lunar year, are as follows: Muḥarram, Šafar, Rabí'u'l-Avval, Rabí'u'th-Thání, Jamádiyu'l-Avval, Jamádiyu'th-Thání, Rajab, Sha'bán, Ramaḍán, Šavval, Dhi'l-Qádh, Dhi'l-Hijj

<sup>3</sup> Bahá'u'lláh says: “*All Feasts have attained their consummation in the two Most Great Festivals, and in the two other Festivals that fall on the twin days – the first of the Most Great Festivals being those days whereon the All-Merciful shed upon the whole of creation the effulgent glory of His most excellent Names and His most exalted Attributes, and the second being that day on which We raised up the One Who announced unto mankind the glad tidings of this Name, through which the dead have been resurrected and all who are in the heavens and on earth have been gathered together. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Ordainer, the Omniscient.*” [KA, par. 110, 59]

Bahá'u'lláh in: “QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS” says

QUESTION #2: Concerning the Festival of the Twin Birthdays

ANSWER: The Birth of the Abhá Beauty was at the hour of dawn on the second day of the month of Muḥarram, the first day of which marketh the Birth of His Herald. These two days are accounted as one in the sight of God. [KA 105]

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- <sup>4</sup> *Days of Remembrance, Selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh for Bahá'í Holy Days*, published by Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Qayyúmu'l-Asmá is the name of the commentary of the Báb on the surih of Joseph of the Quran. He revealed the first chapter of this book on the night of His declaration to Mullá Husayn.
- <sup>6</sup> A.L.M. Nicolas is the son of G.B. Nicolas. Both the father and the son were diplomats, the former was borne in Iran and learnt the Persian language well and later on he became a diplomat as well. He has written extensively about the history of the Bábí Religion and has translated some of the Writings of the Báb into French.
- <sup>7</sup> It is revealed in the Qur'án: "... Say (O Muhammad): My Lord be Glorified! Am I aught save a mortal Messenger? \*And naught prevented mankind from believing when the guidance came unto them save that they said: Hath Allah sent a mortal as (His) messenger?" [Asra, 17: 93-94] and also: "Say: I am only a mortal like you. My Lord inspireth in me that your Allah is only One Allah" [Surih Kahf 18:110]
- <sup>8</sup> Bahá'u'lláh says in the Kitáb-i-Badí' "... and it is the statement by the Point of the Bayan, may the souls of all else save Him be a ransom for Him, that what may prolong the time between the two Revelations is due to the lack of capacity by the generality of the people; And the Daystar of Truth after Its setting will be watching His servants. Any time He can locate a man who has the capacity of hearing the Word of God, He will at that moment will make him recognize Him and this time will not be delayed by the ninth of a ninth of the tenth of a tenth of a minute ..." (provisional translation) [Kitáb-i-Badí', page 86]. This is one of the books revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. It has been published by Bahá'í-Verlag in 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Some references to the **Day of God** from the Bible are as follows:
- "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come". [John 16]
- "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God". [Isaiah 35:1-2]
- "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. shine...: or, be enlightened; for thy light cometh. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee." [Isaiah 60:1-2]
- "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." [Isaiah 25:10]

*“And he said, The Lord will roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the habitations of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel shall wither.” [Amos 1:2]*

*“Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.*

*For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The Lord, The God of hosts, is his name” [Amos 4:12-13]*

*“And the Lord shall utter his voice before his army: for his camp is very great: for he is strong that executeth his word: for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can abide it?*

*Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” [Joel 2:11-12]*

*“Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob’s trouble; but he shall be saved out of it.*

*For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him:*

*But they shall serve the Lord their God” [Jeremiah 30:7-9]*

<sup>10</sup> In the Qur’án it says: *“They indeed are losers who deny their meeting with Allah until, when the Hour cometh on them suddenly, they cry: Alas for us, that we neglected it! They bear upon their backs their burdens. Ah, evil is that which they bear.”* [Surih Al Anam 6:31, also in: 2: 120, 10:7, 18:110, 25:21, 32:10]

<sup>11</sup> The attribute of “qayyum” meaning self-subsisting or eternal appears three times in the Qur’án and in all three cases it appears with “Hayy” meaning live, alive or living. One of the three cases appears as follows: *“Allah! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal.”* [Surih Al-E-Imran 3:2]

<sup>12</sup> Ramaḍán is the ninth month in the lunar calendar; many devout Muslims all over the world observe fasting in this month according to the rules set in their religion. The Qur’án states that the Book was revealed in this month.

<sup>13</sup> In the surih of the Cow (Baqara) in the Qur’án, it says: *“The month of Ramadan in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance ...”* (Surah of Al-Baqara 2:185) Also in Surih Qadr which is 97<sup>th</sup> surih of the Quran, it has five verses and talks about the night of power Laylatu'l-Qadr: *“We revealed it on the Night of Power. \*Ah, what will convey unto thee what the Night of Power is! \* The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. The angels and the Spirit descend therein, by the permission of their Lord, with all decrees. (The night is) Peace until the rising of the dawn.”* [Surih Al-Qadr 97:1-5]

<sup>14</sup> Although the world “night of power” has appeared in the Qur’án, it is not stated which it is. However, it states that the Qur’án was revealed in night of power and in another verse says it was revealed in the month of Ramaḍán. Therefore, the month that the “night of power” falls in it is known but not the particular day of the month. Those who have written extensive commentaries on the Qur’án, on the basis of the existing Ḥadīth, have given conflicting opinions about the particular date. It is of little value to discuss such opinions. One thing which should be stressed here is that Muslims all over the world have high regard for the “night of power” and consider it the most revered day/night of the year and as it is stated in the verse of the Qur’án it is better than one thousand months.

<sup>15</sup> Ḥadīth is verbal expressions of the Prophet Muḥammad among Sunni Muslims; Shí’ah also have added the verbal expressions of the Imáms to this. These verbal expressions have been passed orally from one generation to another, then after the lapse of several centuries they have been recorded. Not all such traditions are reliable. Those who write commentaries on the Qur’án rely heavily on such body of knowledge which at times contains completely false information.

<sup>16</sup> Refer to the note number 13, the verse from the Qur’án in which states in the night of power angles come down: Surih Al-Qadr 97:1-5.

<sup>17</sup> The word “Jibt” appears only once in Qur’án in surihs of Nisa: *Hast thou not seen those unto whom a portion of the Scripture hath been given, how they believe in idols(Jibt) and false deities, and how they say of those (idolaters) who disbelieve: “These are more rightly guided than those who believe”?* [An-Nisa 4:51]

Also, refer to the note #45, p. 224, of the book *Days of Remembrance*.

<sup>18</sup> The name of the three idols in Surih of Najm out of which two of them have been mentioned in the Tablet: *“Have ye thought upon Al-Lat and Al-'Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?”* [Surih An-Najm 53:19-20]

<sup>19</sup> The Surih of Ikhlas (Tawhid) in the Qur’án (Tawhid) states: *“He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.”* [Surih Al-Ikhlās 112]

<sup>20</sup> The following verse from the Qur’án revealed after heavy casualties in one of the Jihad of the believers. In the following verse it says that Muhammad has been lenient with the believers otherwise they would have scattered away from him and leaving him alone: *“It was by the mercy of Allah that thou wast lenient with them (O Muhammad), for if thou hadst been stern and fierce of heart they would have dispersed from round about thee. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them ....”* [Surih Al-E-Imran 3:159]



# End of Days

Moshe Sharon

The End of Days, namely the end of current history and the start of messianic times, when a divinely inspired, and guided holy leader will come to the world to initiate an eternal era of bliss, has occupied humanity to this very day. The ultimate redeemer, whose Biblical designation “Messiah” entered both Christianity and Islam, is known by various other names in religions not influenced by the Bible. The word “messiah”, the anointed (“*mashiyah*” in Hebrew), describes the redeemer, consecrated by being anointed with holy oil in the same way that any person (e.g. priest) or object is consecrated. The Greek translation of the term is *Christos*, Christ, and this term is sometimes used instead, together, or separate from, the messiah. In Arabic the term *masīḥ* is used specifically to denote Jesus of Nazareth who is regarded in Islam to be a prophet whose birth from his mother Mary was caused by divine intervention (“...*His word that he committed to Mary and a spirit from Him*” [Q 4:171]).

In Christianity the duration of the blissful messianic times beginning with the “second coming” of Jesus is one thousand years, for which Christianity yearns, and for that matter, Christians add, the entire humanity should yearn for. In Judaism, it is the Messiah, the anointed one, the son of David who will finally bring ultimate freedom from bondage and exile to the Jewish people, and will re-establish the perfect kingdom of God in their holy land. For the Jews, the redemption is very well defined: it is finally the end of their suffering, it is the renewal of their independence and their freedom from persecution and physical destruction. In many ways, the

universal redeemer for the Christianity and Islam is for the Jews a national savior, and an actual human king belonging to the sacred dynasty of David. In Islam, the *mahdí*, whether Sunní or Shí'ite, with all the differences between them, will come like the others at the end of days, to fill the world with justice, replacing the evil and injustice with which it is filled nowadays. The Sunnís, of course regard the *mahdí*, the one supported and directed by G-d, in whose time, and as the outcome of whose activity the whole world will follow the true religion, namely Islam, Sunní Islam.

The Shí'ites are more specific as far as the identity of the *mahdí* is concerned. Unlike the Sunna, the Shí'ite *mahdí* is still alive, he is the twelfth *imám*, who until his reappearance to fulfill his major function, is hidden in the mystery of his "greater occultation." But when he appears he also will fill the world with justice and bring it under God's true religion, presumably Islam in its Shí'ite version.

Jesus also plays a role in the drama of the end of days according to Islam, mainly in its Sunní version. He also appears at the end of days next to, or with, the *mahdí*, mainly to clear the world of the major opponent of the *mahdí*, the *Dajjál*, the false messiah, the Anti-Christ. In all three or four versions of the apocalypse of the End of Days, the appearance of the ultimate redeemer is connected with the final battle between the forces of evil and those of righteousness. This battle, which assumes different names and takes place at various sites in the Holy Land, ending with the victory of the good side over the evil one, must precede messianic times. [See in Detail N. Cohn, *The pursuit of the Millennium*, London [1962], pp. 1-21 and throughout the book.]

Observing that the world is full of evil, and yearning for its redemption, religious thinkers were induced to look for clues in the scriptures, and transmitted tradition in order to calculate the exact era of messianic times. Each one of the religions mentioned above, Jewish, Christian and Islamic, tried to calculate the time of the arrival of *as-sá'ah* – the "Hour" if we use the Arabic-Islamic term; *aḥarithayamím* – the "End of Days," or *yemothamashiyah* – "The Days of the messiah" or just *haketz* – "The End," in Hebrew, if we use the Jewish term. Similarly "the *Millennium*," and the "Second advent" used in the Christian eschatology [ibid, pp. 13f.]. The search was for two different signs foretelling the approach of the final redemption. One related to its circumstances – unusual occurrences

or major events of colossal magnitude including moral corruption; the second was the actual mathematical calculation of the exact date in which the messianic age should be expected.

It is interesting that these calculations, somehow, led those who were engaged in them to reach the conclusion that their calculations pointed to their own time as the time of redemption, the messianic era and the time of the appearance of God's revealed, guided, inspired and even manifested, promised one. William Miller, for instance, fixed the end of 1843 and the beginning of 1844 as the date of Jesus' second coming. In Judaism there were such calculations, mostly in times of great stress and persecution. Each such calculation ended with disappointment. Some Talmudic scholars tried to stop the repeated exercise of the "calculation of the End" and the activities of "calculators of the End" (*mehashevekitzin*) by bringing proofs that "the Holy One blessed be He will not renew his world before 5000 or 7000 years (have passed since creation)" [BT, *Sanhedrin* 97b]. However, some scholars want to be more specific. An old document in Hebrew, they said, was found in the Roman archives, in which it was stated that "the world will come to an end 4291 years after the creation" [ibid.]. In Sunni Islam, the calculation of the End is described in great detail in the *hadith*, and is based on the division of Islamic history into two cycles (*dawlah*): a short one of one hundred years and a long one of an unspecified period. The short one is based on a *ḥadīth* that states that Gods sends a "renewer" at the beginning of every century to revive the collapsing Islam." At the beginning of each *century*, Allah will send to this nation someone to renew its religion: *inna allah sayab'athilāhādhihi al-umma, 'ala ra's kull qarn man yujaddidlahā dīnaha*. The second indication of the end of days, or the "Hour" in Sunnī Islam is not connected with a date but with some major event, which will initiate the period of wars preceding the final redemption.

In Judaism, "the calculators of the end" based their calculations on the *Book of Daniel*, chapters 7, 9 and 12, where the cryptic language, and the no less cryptic numbers, have excited and challenged these calculators. They have been attracting them to the present day. Already in the early third century, Talmudic scholars attempted to stop the practice of apocalyptic calculations because they felt that they involved disappointment on the one hand, and hasty activity such as attempting revolt, which ended usually with

national disaster. The irresponsibility of such calculations could also lead to blasphemy. For if according to the calculators the Messiah was to come at a certain date, and he did not come then some people could conclude that he would never come, which would be a denial of one of the articles of faith – the belief in the coming of the Messiah. In the language of the Talmud: “Accursed are the calculators of the End for they used to say: since the End has come (according to the calculations) and he (the Messiah) has not come, it follows that he will not come.” This negates the obligation to say, “even if he tarries, I shall wait for him” [ibid.].

However, in institutionalized Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is generally believed that since the true redeemer has not yet come; there is no need, therefore, to prove the authenticity of anyone who claims to be the promised one. Yet, in more than one case in modern times, there appeared claimants to messianic status who created a need for such proofs, namely objective sources proving such claims beyond doubt. The proofs are needed mainly to ward off the attacks of opponents, but they also help to strengthen the faith of believers. One of such cases is that of the Mormon religion in which the claim of Joseph Smith was supported by the mysterious gold plates that only he could read and translate. It was the testimony of eleven people who vowed that they had seen the tablets with their own eyes that established their existence, and therefore firmly supported the claim of Joseph Smith’s prophecy, which led to the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [see “Testimony of three and eight witnesses,” *Book of Mormon*].

The case of the Bábí-Bahá’í faiths is particularly significant in this regard. A few proofs were needed to confirm the claims of the Báb and then Bahá’u’lláh. Both claimed to have been prophets and the manifestations of God. During their lifetime, their claims were based on, and reinforced by, their personalities, writings and sayings. In the case of the Báb, at least, there were also the circumstances of his appearance. The Báb put his claim forward on a very significant date for the Shí’ah, in the year of 1260 of the Hijrah, a thousand years after the disappearance of the 12<sup>th</sup> *imám*, the hidden *mahdí*. Towards the year 1260 AH, and particularly during this exact year, the Messianic expectations in the Shí’ah soared high, and the Báb could well present himself as a Šāhibaz-Zamán, the master of time. The

proof that he was indeed divinely inspired was put forward when he wrote in Arabic a mystical interpretation of the *Súrat Yúsuf*, the 12<sup>th</sup> *Súrah* of the Qur'án, right in front of the amazed eyes of Ḥusayn Bushrú'í, who became his first disciple.

The short ministry of the Báb needed no external, independent proofs. His writings were the best proof, particularly the Bayán, his major opus. His recognition as a Sayyid, namely the acceptance of his genealogy as the descendent of the Prophet, and particularly his imprisonment far away from his disciples which conferred on him the aura of mystical occultation (*ghaybah*) reserved until then only for the Hidden *Mahdí*, added to the establishment of his claim to *mahdíhood*, and to even more.

Bahá'u'lláh openly claimed to be the manifestation of God, and the promised one of all ages and all creeds. During his lifetime he had no need for external proofs, his charismatic personality, his prophetic writings, and his firm claim for divine station were sufficient to secure this status. After he passed away, however, Abdu'l-Bahá', his son and heir, felt that in spite of the fact that a growing Bahá'í community worshiped his father, it was still necessary to delve into the former scriptures, and look for the proofs for his claim. Like calculators of the End before him (including William Miller) he concluded that the best proof could be the one that would show the correlation between the dates of the revelations of the Báb and of Bahá'u'lláh, and the dates found in the cryptic prophecy of Daniel. The Qur'án could also be used for that matter, through the interpretation of some verses, but the Book of Daniel is a different matter. If one could work out mathematically the meaning of Daniel's numbers, that would be a "scientific" proof for the claim of prophecy.

'Abdu'l-Bahá' was no doubt familiar with the correlation between Arabic letters and their numerical value. The heart of the faith created by the Báb and his father was established on such correlations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá', using the numbers in Daniel 9:24 proves that Daniel prophesized the martyrdom and ascendance of Christ [SAQ, 40-45]. We have to note in passing that the calculations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá' were based on wrong translation of a verse in Numbers 14:34, which has nothing to do with "The day of the Lord is one year". This does not appear anywhere in the Bible. What appears in

the Bible is that the day of the Lord is a thousand years [Ps. 90:4, “*For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is passed*”]. However, there are other sources to support the notion that one day could mean one year. At any rate, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ introduces the supposed prophecy about Christ only as an introduction to Daniel’s prophecy about the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh: “*Now that the manifestation of Christ has been proved by the prophecies of Daniel, let us prove the manifestation of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb*” [ibid].

By a simple arithmetic exercise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ shows that Daniel prophesized the appearance of the Báb in 1844. The cryptic verse in Daniel 8:14, which in the original Hebrew says: “וַיֹּאמְרָאֵלֵיעֶזְרֵאֲבָבָקָרְאֵלִפְסִי וְשִׁמְאוֹתִי נִצְדָקְדָשׁ” And he said unto me: Unto two thousand and three hundred [days] then shall the sanctuary be cleansed” [Translation: Authorized King James Version]. The Arabic translation (published in Beirut, December 1880) which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must have consulted reads: فَقَالَ لِي الْبَاقِيُونَ ثَلَاثَ مِائَةِ مَسَاءٍ وَصَبَاحٍ ثُمَّ يُطَهَّرُ الْقُدْسِ. This is interpreted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ to mean that in 2300 years, “the sanctuary will be cleansed,” namely that will be the time of the “dawn of the Manifestation”. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ then makes the following calculation: From the time of the edict of Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem until the birth of Christ there were 456 years, and the Báb appeared in 1844. Adding these two numbers (1844+456) and you get 2300. (Artaxerxes’ rule began in 465 BC, and the permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was issued by the King to Nehemiah as late as summer 445BC. *JE*, 2:146)

Daniel’s cryptic verse probably means 2300 days, which, in Biblical terms could also mean years. (יָמִים day, and יָמִים days, in the plural, mean both a day and a year). Otherwise, as we have just seen, based on Ps. 90, *yom* (day), would be a thousand years and this surely is not the interpretation of Daniel in this verse. Daniel, therefore, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s calculations prophesized the “dawn of the Manifestation of the Báb” [SAQ, 42]. One note should be added here; the *Septuagint* Greek translation of the Bible says clearly “two thousand three hundred *days*.” (The word “*days*” does not appear in the original Hebrew text, but it is implied by the usage of “evening and morning” which was translated correctly into Arabic.) Incidentally, William Miller used the text of Daniel to prove that the Second Advent will take place in 1844.

Once Abdu'l-Bahá' established the manifestation of the Báb by Daniel's prophecy, he used the same source to prove the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh. For this purpose, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' changed calendar, and based his proof on the Islamic one instead of the Christian one, which he just used to prove the manifestation of the Báb. In Chapter 12: 11, Daniel mentions twelve hundred and ninety years *"from the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away and the abomination that maketh desolate set up..."* This is a very cryptic verse too. 'Abdu'l-Bahá' was not interested in the "daily sacrifice" nor the "abomination that maketh desolate" (שֶׁקִיץ שִׁמָּם in Hebrew). Only the number 1290 interested him for proof. With no effort he shows that 1290 lunar years had elapsed from the announcement of Muhammad's prophecy, ten years *before* the Hijrah, until the announcement of Bahá'u'lláh of his prophecy and manifestation in 1280 AH, namely in 1863, at the Garden of Ridwán.

The obscure text of Daniel and its cryptic numbers allowed "Calculators of the End" throughout the ages to find in them almost anything they wanted. Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá' goes as far as attributing to Daniel full knowledge of both the Hijrah and the Christian calendars (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), calculating of the appearance of the Báb using the Christian calendar and placing the birth of Christ in the centre of his calculation, an event of no significance for the Jews.

On the Jewish side and about the same time, the number 1290 was used in a short treatise by Joseph ben 'Uliel (1858-1937), a rabbi who was born in Morocco, was a professor of Roman languages at the University of Lisbon, and the consul of Morocco in Portugal. In 1917 he wrote his "Five Statements of Daniel on the Redemption" (חמישה מאמרי דניאל על הגאולה). He regarded the year 1917, or 5677 of the Jewish calendar, as the year of global redemption, but particularly the long awaited redemption of Israel. According to his calculation, all the numbers in Daniel's prophecies lead to the same conclusion -that the Hebrew year 5677 definitely signifies Messianic times. He goes so far as to suggest that the number 1335 in Daniel 12:12, *"Blessed be he that waiteth and cometh to the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days,"* refers to the Hijrah year equivalent to 1917 CE. "It is possible that this number hints to the date counted by the Mohammedans, the rulers of the Holy Land, from then until now, which comes to one thousand three hundred and thirty five."

Abdu'l-Bahá by the way does not refer to this number. [For an interesting Christian interpretation of the same date see *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, Daniel 12:12, note 3.] Ben 'Uliel, however, does refer to 1290 which 'Abdu'l-Bahá' calculates as the time from the proclamation of Mohammad's mission until the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh in 1280 AH (1863). 'Abdu'l-Bahá' does not refer to the whole verse in Daniel 12:11, which speaks about 1290 (days/years) which will elapse from "the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away and the abomination that maketh desolate set up." For Ben 'Uliel this entire verse is important for establishing his calculation based on the general, not the Muslim calendar. This verse mentions two events – the taking away of the daily sacrifice (in the Temple) and the setting up of the destructive "abomination." In between the two, he adds the destruction of the Temple, about ten years after the abolition of the sacrifice. The "abomination that maketh desolate" according to his understanding, is the mosque built by caliph 'Umar on the Temple Mount (meaning the Dome of the rock which was built over the site, that is generally regarded as the location of the Holy of Holies in the Temple.). This took place, he says, in 637 when 'Umar conquered Jerusalem. Now the calculation up to 1290 adds up as follows:

From the abolition of the daily sacrifice to the destruction of the Temple: 10 years

From the conquest of Jerusalem by 'Umar until Ben 'Uliel's present: 1280 years

In this way, says Ben 'Uliel, Daniel's verse points directly to 1917 (1280 + 637), his own time, interpreting the whole verse rather than only using the number 1290. I quoted Ben 'Uliel to show that the Book of Daniel can be easily manipulated to serve the needs of the user. It is, however, interesting that 'Abdu'l-Bahá' turns to the Bible when searching for proofs from a sacred text. For the Western faithful, this has been surely convincing.

Until now I have not dealt with the involvement of the Bahá'í Jews in supplying proofs for the validation of the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh. A very interesting manuscript, which came to my attention some time ago, triggered the present discussion.



The manuscript is a one page document in Hebrew, Judeo Arabic and Aramaic. It surfaced in the antiquities market in Jerusalem. Its owner, an antique dealer, demanded for it an exorbitant price. Since the document is still in his possession, I cannot publish it. I was able to make, however, a copy of it. The writer of this document is a Jewish convert to the Bahá'í faith who brings proofs that the actual name Bahá'u'lláh is no less than the representation of the most secret, the most holy name of the Lord in Hebrew consisting of the four letters, the *tetragrammaton*, which no Jew is allowed to pronounce. The true vowels of this sacred name has been intentionally obscured to prevent its exact pronunciation. Instead the vowels of the word *Adonai* ("my Lord") was attached to the four consonants of the Lord's name creating a bizarre meaningless combination. The usage in western languages of the pronunciation "Jehovah" or "Yahweh" is based on these purposefully confusing vowels. Even the writing of the four consonants outside the realm of sacred writing is not allowed. In post-Biblical literature we are told that only the high priest could pronounce the name of the Lord in its correct form, and only on the Day of Atonement and only next to the holiest place in the Temple.

In this document, the Jewish writer has no such restrictions. Bahá'u'lláh is the Lord in his most majestic, secret and mystical name Y-H-W-H. The document begins with the four letters, the *tetragrammaton*, and under these letters we read <sup>א</sup>בהי בהא which is the exact transliteration of the Arabic بها الأبهى. The article *al* in Hebrew is written in small letters above the text; the real name should accordingly be read without the article, *Bahá Abhá* in Arabic بها أبهى. The numerical value of these letters (2+5+1+1+2+5+10) is 26, which is the exact numerical value of the *tetragrammaton* (10+5+6+5=26). In other words <sup>א</sup>בהי בהא (note that אבהי is the exact transliteration of the Arabic) is יהוה. For a Jew this is no less than pure impudent blasphemy. Following this we read:

ברוך הבהא אדני יהוה "Welcome Adonai (the Lord) Y-H-W-H."

The four letters beginning the four Hebrew words create the acronym בהאי — Bahai. The same is repeated at the end of the document where this acronym is specified.

The text then continues in Judeo-Arabic and Aramaic written in Hebrew letters: *ha bisharat hadrati rabbina wa moshi' ana bahá elohayah*. This is the good tidings of our Lord and Saviour Bahá (splendor) of God. The word Saviour is in Hebrew with the Arabic possessive ending in the plural. Instead of al-Abhá which in the Arabic means the “most glorious”, “most splendid” referring to God and to Bahá'u'lláh in the designation “Bahá' al-Abhá” – the glorious of the most glorious, the Hebrew/Aramaic text has the word *elohayah* – God, and the combination for Bahá'u'lláh – The splendor of God (*bahá elohayah*). This one sentence is a statement repeating the idea which defines Bahá'u'lláh as both the Lord and the Saviour.

The usage of the Hebrew *moshiya'* to denote “saviour” is important, for it comes from the list of the adjectival appellations of the God of Israel, defined in the first Benediction of the daily “Eighteen Benedictions Prayer” as מֶלֶךְ עֶזְרָר וּמוֹשִׁיעוֹמָגֵן. The word *moshiya'* (Gr. σωτῆρ) indicates the exalted divine station of Bahá'u'lláh in his capacity as the ultimate Savior. He is described in terms saved for God Himself: “A Helper King, Saviour and Protector.” The text moves to Aramaic quoting the *qaddish* prayer: *yehesh mehrabbahmeborakhle'alam we-'alme'almayah*. “May His Great Name (in the original the Lord's, but here could well mean Bahá'u'lláh) be blessed forever and ever.” The text continues in Hebrew: *bishnat shalosh'esrim malkhut Náşir-al Dín Sháh Melekh Paras ...etc.*

“*In the year twenty three of the rule of Nasir ad Din Shah, the King of Persia, concerning the vision of Daniel, fulfilling his prophecy*” (12:11). “*And from the time that the daily sacrifices shall be taken away and the abomination that maketh desolate set up one thousand two hundred and ninety days; every day is a year from the Caliphate of 'Umar until now and this is in the year 5633 (=1873) of the creation*”]. The year 1290 AH is 1873 corresponding to 5633 of the Creation, which the writer identifies as “now”. However, 23 years of the rule of Náşir ad-Dín Sháh is not 1873 but 1871. This date cannot be explained, but could well be a mistake. This date 1873 however is very important for the writer, as we shall soon see.

Here, just as in the calculations of Ben 'Uliel, we read the name of 'Umar. Ben Uliel identified “the abomination that maketh desolate” in Daniel's prophecy, as the mosque of 'Umar, and it seems that here

also ‘Umar’s Caliphate in general could well be the “abomination.” If one takes into consideration that for the Shi‘ah ‘Umar is probably the most hated figure in the entire Islamic history, this hatred filtered through into the Bábí and Bahá’í thought, and found its way to occupy the place of the “abomination” in Daniel’s vision. One thing seems sure, the 1290 date in this document is not the period of time that elapsed from the time of ‘Umar’s Caliphate but of the time from the *Hijrah*. It is only thus that we arrive at 5633 corresponding to 1873 the accepted date of the writing of *al-Kitáb al-Aqdas*. Unless there is a mistake in the dating. The text that follows says:

*The majesty of the Divine presence (or the Being) shone and blazed; the light of ‘I am that I am’ glittered, rising, when the mighty and awful God became jealous for the shrine of Zion in the tower of Akko. ‘Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities etc. [Thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of its stakes shall ever be removed neither shall any of its cords be broken. [Isaiah 33:20]’.]*

In the document, “etc.” is written after ‘solemnities’ leaving the continuation of the very well-known verse (continued here in square brackets) to the reader. In this part the writer describes the appearance of Bahá’u’lláh as ‘rising light’ and his imprisonment in the fortress (“tower”) of ‘Akko as the time when he had the vision of the revival of Jerusalem and the “shrine of Zion” (היכל אלציונה). The language is basically Hebrew to with the Arabic article (“al”) added. For the glitter of light of the new manifestation, the writer uses the Hebrew words אור אל אלהים the light of God *Ehyeh*, the word by which God defined himself to Moses: “I AM” [Exodus 3:14]. The manifestation is defined by the Hebrew כבוד אלהים the Majesty of Being (הויה).

In the fortress of Akko the angry God is jealous for the temple of Zion. This is an interesting interpretation of the redemptive station of Bahá’u’lláh as an angry god for Zion, and its saviour. In this way, he fulfills the role of the Jewish Messiah who redeems Zion, and heals its wounds. The following paragraph in the text moves again to deal with yet another date connected with the time of redemption:

Blessed is he who waits and reaches the days of one thousand, three hundred and thirty five days – each day means a year (הַיָּמִים לַשָּׁנָה). Until now (Aramaic: כְּעַן) he revealed the year 5675 as the [time of] redemption according to the full calendar.

(In the text לִפְנֵי acronym: “according to the lesser calendar system” namely without the figure of thousands, but it should be לִפְנֵי ג', acronym: “according to the full calendar” system including the reckoning of the thousands as we have it in the text. Without the thousands, the date is 675, but the text explicitly gives the full date with the thousands that is to say 5675.

This is a difficult part. 5675 corresponds to 1915, the middle of the First World War. The writer uses the Aramaic כְּעַן meaning “now, at this time,” to denote the time of redemption. However it is possible that he means that the year 1335 of the Hijrah which corresponds to 1917 is the awaited date of the redemption which is expected already in 1915 (5675). This brings us back to the calculations of Ben 'Uliel from Lisbon who in his own way calculated that the redemption would occur in 1280 after 'Umar's conquest of Jerusalem ( $1280 + 637 = 1917$ ). The combination of General Allenby's conquest of Jerusalem in 1917, and the Balfour Declaration in the same year obviously had the qualities of redemption for the Jewish rabbi, professor and a consul at Lisbon, as well as for our obscure writer, who at this point breaks into exaltation with the verse of Isaiah 52:7: “*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation, that sayeth unto Zion: Thy God reigneth!*” This verse is used by Christians to mean Jesus and by Bahá'is to mean Bahá'u'lláh.

Following this, the writer finishes the happy part of the text by quoting a verse from a religious hymn sung by the Jews on the conclusion of Sabbath (Saturday night). Only a Jew could have thought of including this verse in a text dedicated to Bahá'u'lláh in his capacity of the harbinger of the redemption of Zion and his coronation, according to Isaiah, as her king. The harbinger could be Bahá'u'lláh but it could also be the Báb proclaiming the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh to the throne of Zion.

In Jewish tradition, the herald of the Messiah is the zealot prophet Elijah. He will precede the coming of the Messiah, preparing the way for him. It is not surprising that the Báb is represented as Elijah. In Jewish tradition Elijah, who destroyed the priests of the Phoenician god Ba'al out of jealousy for the God of Israel is likened to the priest Phineas who is described in the Bible as the ultimate zealot. In reward for his jealousy, God says: "*I give to him my covenant of peace*" [Numbers 25:12]. Of course, it is Moses who brought the divine promise to Phineas, who reappeared, many generations later, as Elijah. This idea is conveyed in the hymn sung at the end of the Sabbath the first verses of which run as follows:

Elijah the Prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah the Gileadean:  
Let him come quickly to us with the messiah, the son of  
David.

He is a man who was jealous for the name of God; He is a man  
who received the good tidings of peace by Yekutiel.

Yekutiel is another name of Moses in Jewish tradition. Only a Jew who kept the Sabbath and was well acquainted with the ritual at its conclusion could quote the verses of this hymn, which refer to the Messianic ideas of this document. This in fact could be the end of the document but the writer finishes by emphasizing yet again the divine station of Bahá'u'lláh. For in this hymn the Báb who is Elijah, and beforehand Phineas, was chosen to receive the good tidings by no less than Moses himself. However the text continues with going back to the holy *tetragrammaton*. Y-H-W-H, he says, is Bahá'u'lláh in gematry, as we saw above. The acronym "Welcome the Lord Y-H-W-H" in Hebrew **בְּרוּךְ הַבָּא אֲדוֹנֵי הָעוֹלָם** (which we met at the very beginning of the document), gives us the word **בְּהָאִי** -Bahá'í. The text mentions the reference to Daniel 12:11-12, which we dealt with above, and is used here towards the end of the document as a reminder. It ends with a sentence in Aramaic: "It came from the Holy Torah to the people of the world, from the vision of the later prophets who brought the good tidings of Oneness." The meaning of this sentence is more or less clear. The message of Divine unity, brought to the world in general, is found in the Holy Torah and the prophecies of the later prophets meaning, most probably one prophet, Daniel, to whom the reference is supplied. Above of the

words “vision of the later prophets” the writer inserted two words “visions that bring good tidings” correcting the language of the text under them.

## Summary

The *Calculation of the End* in the anonymous document presented here refers to the same dates used by Ben ‘Uliel and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. All three documents refer to the date of a number of years in the esoteric prophecies in the Book of Daniel. The main number is 1290 which appears in the last chapter of the book, chapter 12 verses 11-12. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, regards it to refer to the time that elapsed from the public proclamation of Moḥammad’s mission, ten years before the *hijrah*. If we detract 10 years from 1290, we are left with the 1280 years that have elapsed since the *hijrah*, which corresponds to 1863 CE, the year of Bahá’u’lláh’s proclamation at Riḍwán.

Ben ‘Uliel refers to the whole verse (12:11) and also detracts 10 years from 1290 – the time that elapsed from the abolishment of the daily sacrifice to the destruction of the Temple. According to him the “abomination” mentioned by Daniel refers to the mosque, which was built by Umar in 637.

The calculation in the anonymous document is similar to Ben Uliel’s although the interpretation is none too clear. However, in this document the important parts are dedicated to proving the divinity of Bahá’u’lláh using combinations of letters which demonstrate that the name Bahá’u’lláh is no less than the revered, mystical and great name of the Lord.

# Elucidations

## 1. Bahá'í Fast

a compilation<sup>1</sup>

### Part I: Descriptive

*Were the mouth of Thy will to address them saying: "Observe, for My Beauty's sake, the fast, O people, and set no limit to its duration," I swear by the majesty of Thy glory, that every one of them will faithfully observe it, will abstain from whatsoever will violate Thy law, and will continue to do so until they yield up their souls unto Thee, for they have tasted the sweetness of Thy call, and become inebriated with Thy remembrance and praise and with the words proceeding from the lips of Thy command. — Bahá'u'lláh*

Brief excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh wherein He is speaking explicitly of the Fast.

(The headings and numbering below are arbitrary, and have been added for reference.)

### Descriptive of the Fast

1. "We have commanded you to pray and fast..."

2. "...this is ordained by God..."
3. "We have enjoined upon you fasting..."
4. "...during a brief period..."
5. "...the season of restraint..."
6. "...this grace that is appointed in the Book."
7. "In truth, I say that obligatory prayer and fasting occupy an exalted station in the sight of God."
8. "It is, however, in a state of health that their virtue can be realized."
9. "...a service due to God..." [Bahá'u'lláh expands a statement of Muhammad to include fasting.]
10. "Fasting is illumination, prayer is light." [Bahá'u'lláh corroborates a saying or tradition.]
11. "...We are the Fast..." [Bahá'u'lláh quotes Imam Ja'far Sadiq, the sixth Shi'ih Imam. (83-148 A.H.)]
12. "...the ornament of the fast prescribed by Thee..."
13. "...Thou didst enjoin Thy servants to observe the fast."
14. "With it Thou didst adorn the preamble of the Book of Thy Laws revealed unto Thy creatures..."
15. "...and didst deck forth the Repositories of Thy commandments in the sight of all who are in Thy heaven and all who are on Thy earth."
16. "Thou hast endowed every hour of these days with a special virtue, inscrutable to all except Thee..."
17. "Thou hast, also, assigned unto every soul a portion of this virtue..."
18. "Fasting and obligatory prayer are as two wings to man's life."
19. "Verily, the religion of God is like unto heaven; fasting is its sun, and obligatory prayer is its moon. In truth, they are the



pillars of religion whereby the righteous are distinguished from those who transgress His commandments.”

20. “...that which He hath revealed in His Ancient Book.”
21. “Know thou that religion is as heaven; and fasting and obligatory prayer are its sun and its moon.”
22. “...that which they have been commanded in this Day.”
23. “...in accordance with His good-pleasure.”
24. “Fasting hath been decreed for you in the month of Ala.”
25. “Thus doth the Beloved of mankind instruct you as bidden by God, the All-Powerful, the Unconstrained.”
26. “We, verily, have commanded all to observe the Fast in these days as a bounty on Our part...”
27. “Say: By God! His Law is a fortress unto you, could ye but understand.”
28. “Even though outwardly the Fast is difficult and toilsome, yet inwardly it is bounty and tranquillity.”
29. “Whatsoever God hath revealed is beloved of the soul.”
30. “...that which is pleasing and acceptable unto Him.”
31. “The law of the Fast is ordained for those who are sound and healthy...”
32. “The days of fasting have arrived wherein those servants who circle round Thy throne and have attained Thy presence have fasted.”
33. “These are the days whereon Thou hast enjoined Thy chosen ones, Thy loved ones and Thy servants to observe the Fast, which Thou hast made a light unto the people of Thy Kingdom...”
34. “Since they are turning to the court of Thy good-pleasure, all their days are days of fasting.”

***Brief excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh wherein  
He is speaking explicitly of the Fast***

(The headings and numbering below are arbitrary,  
and have been added for reference.)

**Part II: Purposes of the Fast**

1. "...that the fire of Thy love and the heat produced by the fast enjoined by Thee may inflame them in Thy Cause..."
2. "...and make them to be occupied with Thy praise and with remembrance of Thee."
3. "...the ornament of Thine acceptance..."
4. "...that through it they may purify their souls..."
5. "...and rid themselves of all attachment to any one but Thee..."
6. "...and that out of their hearts may ascend that which will be worthy of the court of Thy majesty and may well beseem the seat of the revelation of Thy oneness."
7. "Cleanse Thou by its means the hearts of Thy servants..."
8. "...attaining unto that which Thou didst ordain..."
9. "...cleanse us from the noisome savors of our transgressions."
10. [We get to ask God such as this:] "Do Thou accept all that we have done for love of Thee, and for the sake of Thy pleasure, and all that we have left undone as a result of our subjection to our evil and corrupt desires."
11. "...We have ordained obligatory prayer and fasting so that all may by these means draw nigh unto God, the Most Powerful, the Well-Beloved."
12. "...observe that which will draw them nearer unto Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Loving."
13. "All praise be unto God, Who hath... enjoined on them the Fast that those possessed of means may become apprised of the woes and sufferings of the destitute."

14. "...be acceptable in the sight of God."
15. "...that which hath been and will be of profit to them."
16. "Well is it with the one who fulfilleth My decrees..."
17. "Verily, He hath no purpose therein save to benefit the souls of His servants..."
18. "Blessed is the one who through the heat generated by the Fast increaseth his love..."
19. "...and who, with joy and radiance, ariseth to perform worthy deeds."
20. "Purification and training are conditioned and dependent only on such rigorous exercises as are in accord with the Book of God and sanctioned by Divine law, not those which the deluded have inflicted upon the people."
21. "Verily, I say, fasting is the supreme remedy and the most great healing for the disease of self and passion."
22. "...to fulfill that which hath been decreed in the Book."
23. "...serveth solely to benefit His friends and loved ones."
24. "...Thou hast bidden to observe the Fast for the sake of Thy love and good pleasure..."
25. "There are various stages and stations for the Fast and innumerable effects and benefits are concealed therein. Well is it with those who have attained unto them."
26. "I beg of Thee, O my God, by those who have fasted for love of Thee and have quaffed the living waters of submission from the hands of Thy bounty, to ordain for Thy loved ones, who under the blaze of the orb of Thy trials have clung to the cord of patience, all the good Thou hast reckoned in Thy Books and Thy Tablets."
27. "I beg of Thee, O my God, by these mighty pillars, [fasting and obligatory prayer] to keep Thy religion safe from the mischief of the ungodly and the plotting of every wicked doer."

28. "All glory be to Thee, O my God, for Thou hast graciously enabled me to fast during this month which Thou hast related to Thy Name, the Most Exalted, and called Ala (Loftiness). Thou hast commanded that Thy servants and Thy people should fast therein and seek thereby to draw nearer unto Thee."
29. "The days and the months of the year have culminated with the Fast, even as the first month began with Thy Name, Bahá, that all might testify that Thou art the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden..."
30. "...and be well assured that the glory of all names is conferred only through the glory of Thy Cause and the word expounded only by Thy will and revealed through Thy purpose."
31. "Thou hast ordained that this month be a remembrance and honor from Thee..."
32. "...and a sign of Thy presence among them..."
33. "...that they may not forget Thy grandeur and Thy majesty, Thy sovereignty and Thy glory..."
34. "...and may be well assured that from time immemorial Thou hast ever been and wilt ever be Ruler over the entire creation."

### Part III: How To

*Since Thou hast adorned them, O my Lord, with the ornament of the fast prescribed by Thee, do Thou adorn them also with the ornament of Thine acceptance, through Thy grace and bountiful favor. For the doings of men are all dependent upon Thy good-pleasure, and are conditioned by Thy behest. 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. And shouldst Thou decree that he who hath observed the fast hath broken it, that person would be numbered with such as have caused the Robe of Thy Revelation to be stained with dust, and been far removed from the crystal waters of this living Fountain. — Bahá'u'lláh*

## **Brief excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh wherein He is speaking explicitly of the Fast**

(The headings and numbering below are arbitrary,  
and have been added for reference.)

### ***How To Fast***

1. "...those who have observed the fast for love of Thee..."
2. "I have fasted for love of Thee..."
3. "...and in pursuance of Thine injunction..."
4. "...Thy servants who have turned towards the precincts of Thy court and the sanctuary of Thy presence, and have observed the fast for love of Thee."
5. "For Thine ardent lovers Thou hast, according to Thy decree, reserved, at each daybreak, the cup of Thy remembrance..."
6. "...they forsake their couches in their longing to celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy virtues..."
7. "...and flee from sleep in their eagerness to approach Thy presence and partake of Thy bounty."
8. "Abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sundown..."
9. "...beware lest desire deprive you of this grace..."
10. "...have broken my fast with Thy praise on my tongue and in conformity with Thy pleasure."
11. "...give me to drink of the wine of Thy mercy..."
12. "...and of the pure beverage of Thy favor..."
13. "...that I may so fix my gaze upon Thee and be so detached from all else but Thee, that the world and all that hath been created therein may appear before me as a fleeting day which Thou hast not deigned to create."
14. "...Cause me to taste, O my Lord, the divine sweetness of Thy remembrance and praise."

15. "I beseech Thee to grant that I may be assisted to observe the fast wholly for Thy sake, O Thou Who art full of majesty and glory!"
16. "Empower me, then, O my God, to be reckoned among them that have clung to Thy laws and precepts for the sake of Thee alone, their eyes fixed on Thy face."
17. "...whose wine is all that hath proceeded out of the mouth of Thy primal will, whose pure beverage is Thine enthralling call..."
18. "Observe ye the commandments of God for love of His beauty..."
19. "...and be not of those who follow in the ways of the abject and foolish."
20. "Cling firmly to obligatory prayer and fasting."
21. "Blessed be the one who soareth with their aid in the heaven of the love of God, the Lord of all worlds."
22. "Be not neglectful of obligatory prayer and fasting."
23. "...observe the most great and exalted Fast, which is to protect one's eye from beholding whatever is forbidden..."
24. "...and to withhold one's self from food, drink..."
25. "...and whatever is not of Him."
26. "Fast ye for the sake of your Lord, the Mighty, the Most High."
27. "...for the love of My Beauty..."
28. "Restrain yourselves from sunrise to sunset."
29. "Cling ye to the cord of God's laws..."
30. "...him who hath fasted out of love for Thee and for Thy good-pleasure – and not out of self and desire, nor out of fear of Thy wrath..."
31. "I beg of Thee by Thy Name, the All-Glorious, to accept the fast of those who have fasted for love of Thee and for the sake of

Thy good-pleasure and have carried out what Thou hast bidden them in Thy Books and Tablets.”

32. “We have observed the Fast in conformity with Thy bidding and break it now through Thy love and Thy good-pleasure.”
33. “We have fasted this day, O my Lord, by Thy command and Thy bidding in accordance with what Thou hast revealed in Thy perspicuous Book. We have withheld our souls from passion and from whatsoever Thou abhorrest until the day drew to an end and the time arrived to break the fast.”
34. [How not to fast:] “How many those who keep the fast in the daytime, only to protest against the One by Whose very command the ordinance of the fast was first established!”

“Do not bring our fasts to an end with this fast, O my Lord, nor the covenants Thou hast made with this covenant.”

## The Bahá'í Fast, Additional Insight, Part IV

(The headings and numbering below are arbitrary, and have been added for reference.)

### *From the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá regarding the Fast*

1. “Ye had written of the fasting month. Fortunate are ye to have obeyed the commandment of God, and kept this fast during the holy season. For this material fast is an outer token of the spiritual fast; it is a symbol of self-restraint, the withholding of oneself from all appetites of the self, taking on the characteristics of the spirit, being carried away by the breathings of heaven and catching fire from the love of God.”
2. “The laws of God, such as fasting, obligatory prayer and the like, as well as His counsels regarding virtues, good deeds and proper conduct, must be carried out everywhere to the extent possible, unless some insurmountable obstacle or some great danger presents itself or it runneth counter to the dictates of wisdom. For indolence and laxity hinder the outpourings of love from the clouds of divine mercy, and people will thus remain deprived.”

3. "Thou hast written about the Fast. This is a most weighty matter and thou shouldst exert thine utmost in its observance. It is a fundamental of the Divine Law, and one of the pillars of the religion of God."
4. "Well is it with you, as you have followed the Law of God and arisen to observe the Fast during these blessed days, for this physical fast is a symbol of the spiritual fast. This Fast leadeth to the cleansing of the soul from all selfish desires, the acquisition of spiritual attributes, attraction to the breezes of the All-Merciful, and enkindlement with the fire of divine love."
5. "Fasting is the cause of the elevation of one's spiritual station."

***From Shoghi Effendi, regarding the Fast***

1. "As regards fasting, it constitutes, together with the obligatory prayers, the two pillars that sustain the revealed Law of God. They act as stimulants to the soul, strengthen, revive and purify it, and thus insure its steady development."
2. "The fasting period...is essentially a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation, during which the believer must strive to make the necessary readjustments in his inner life, and to refresh and reinvigorate the spiritual forces latent in his soul. Its significance and purpose are, therefore, fundamentally spiritual in character. Fasting is symbolic, and a reminder of abstinence from selfish and carnal desires."
3. "Those unwarranted practices, in connection with the sacrament of baptism, of communion, of confession of sins, of asceticism, of priestly domination, of elaborate ceremonials, of holy war and of polygamy, have one and all been rigidly suppressed by the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh; whilst the rigidity and rigor of certain observances, such as fasting, which are necessary to the devotional life of the individual, have been considerably abated."

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from [bahaimosaic.blogspot.com/2009\\_02\\_26\\_archive.html](http://bahaimosaic.blogspot.com/2009_02_26_archive.html).



## 2. Persian translation of Arabic verses

### Universal House of Justice

Transmitted by email

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

1 February 2018

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 7 November 2014 about the translation of the Arabic Writings into Persian. It has considered your questions regarding this matter and has instructed us to write to you as follows. The delay in doing so is deeply regretted.

That the Arabic Bahá'í Writings are not translated into the Persian language is based on guidance of the beloved Guardian. There are no authorized Persian translations of any of the Arabic Writings, and publication of any Persian translation of the full text of an Arabic Sacred Text is not permitted. In his letters to believers in Iran, Shoghi Effendi also exhorted the friends to recite the Obligatory Prayers in Arabic. However, drawing upon an individual's translation of these Prayers or other Tablets in order to aid one's understanding is, of course, permissible, although such personal translations should not be recited in Bahá'í gatherings. No issue should be made of what individuals do in private prayer.

Latitude has likewise been given to using a personal translation or a gist of a passage in Persian for the purpose of enhancing understanding of the Writings, and these may be shared for this purpose with a few others – for instance, in the context of a study

group. Further, the House of Justice has previously indicated that adding diacriticals to the Arabic words and explaining the meaning of difficult words are also acceptable means of assisting the friends to gain a better understanding of the Writings in Arabic.

In light of a number of factors, Tajik and Persian are for practical purposes treated differently.

It is hoped that the above information will be of assistance. You may rest assured of the loving prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

# In Memoriam

**Dr. Muhammad Afnan**

**1930 - 2017**



Dr Muhammad Afnan was an ardent supporter, active collaborator and much-appreciated adviser for the Irfan Colloquium and its publications. After a very fruitful life spent in the various fields of service, he took his flight to the Abha Kingdom in August 2017 and Irfan Colloquium missed a most valuable collaborator. He and his wife, Dr Mehry Kiani-Afnan, were regularly participating in the annual sessions of the Irfan Colloquium held in Louhelen Bahá'í School in Michigan and both of them making presentations on scholarly studies in the Bahá'í Writings, particularly Writings of the

Bab. Dr Afnan was deeply loved and highly respected by the participants in the Irfan Colloquium gatherings as a gentle, wise, loving and richly informed of the Bábí and Bahá'í literature. He was a direct descendant, fifth generation, from Khál-i-Akbar, the oldest maternal uncle of the Báb, who was honoured to be the recipient of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* from the pen of Bahá'u'lláh. Dr Afnan was born in Yazd, Iran, in 1930 and lived there until he moved to Tehran as a young man to receive his university education, getting a doctorate degree in veterinary medicine and bacteriology.

Dr Afnan served as a professor at the Department of Veterinary Medicine in the Tehran University. He also served on the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Tehran for some 15 years, serving as its secretary for 10 years. In 1978, he and his family moved to Norway to settle there as Bahá'í pioneers. Shortly after the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in January 1979, they were denied residency permit in Norway. At the same time, he was advised not to return to Iran because of his prominence in the Bahá'í administration. In the ensuing persecutions, seven of the eight other members of the Assembly on which he had served were arrested and executed. Afnan family moved to Canada, settling in the town of Dundas, where they helped form the Local Spiritual Assembly and became active and much-loved members of the community. Dr Afnan worked as a researcher at the cancer clinic at McMaster University for 8 years, gaining the respect of his colleagues through his unique combination of great knowledge and great humility.

Dr Afnan through extensive personal study and research, which he started in his youth, became a distinguished scholar of the Bahá'í writings and one of the handful of experts in the area of the Writings of the Báb. He authored numerous articles and essays on a wide range of Bahá'í subjects over the years that were recently published in two volumes

Dr Afnan was one of the main faculty members of the Institute of Advanced Baha'i Studies in Iran. Since Bahá'í institutions were banned by the order of Islamic government authorities in Iran, Dr Afnan, assisted by his dear wife, established the Institute for Baha'i Studies in the Persian language in Dundas. This Institute, over the years, published a large volume of books and booklets on various Bahá'í subjects and encouraged and assisted Persian Baha'i scholars.

In 1989, Dr Muhammad and Dr Mehry Afnan were invited to move to Haifa, Israel, where they both served in the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre for the next thirteen years.

Upon returning to Canada in 2002, they settled in Mississauga and once again became enthusiastically involved in Bahá' activities. They had the opportunity to serve at the World Centre once more when they were invited to work on a special project for three months in 2013.

Dr Afnan made a number of valuable presentations at the annual sessions of Irfan Colloquium based on his vast knowledge and studies. His research-based articles and commentaries are published in various volumes of *Safini-yi Irfan*.

The Universal House of Justice expressed recognition and appreciation for lifelong services of Dr Afnan in the following message e-mailed to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada:

We were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of dearly loved Muhammad Afnan, devoted servant of the Ancient Beauty and an esteemed scion of the noble family of the Blessed Báb. His exemplary services to the Cause over many decades—in the administration of the Faith in Iran, in the enrichment of Bahá'í scholarship, and, in particular, in the study of the Writings of the Báb—were distinguished by diligence, wisdom, and surpassing humility. Serving at the Bahá'í World Centre, he made invaluable and lasting contributions to the work of the Research Department.

We offer our loving sympathy to his dear wife, Mehri, their children, and other family members and assure them of our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his illumined soul in all the worlds of God and for the consolation of their hearts.

— The Universal House of Justice

# Dr. Heshmat Shariary

1934 - 2018



Dr. Heshmat Shahriary was a staunch supporter of the 'Irfán Colloquium. Accompanied by his wife, Mrs. Farideh Shahriary, he regularly participated in the annual sessions of 'Irfán Colloquium held at Bosch Bahá'í School in northern California. As long as his health condition allowed it, he was presenting the outcome of his research and studies at the 'Irfán Colloquium. Some of his research-based articles are published in the volumes of *Safíni-yi-'Irfán*.

Heshmat Shahriary was born on May 1, 1934, in Kashan, Iran. He was a fourth-generation Bahá'í. His great-grandfather Mulla Rida of Zavareh and his grandfather Assad'ulláh, both were Bahá'í Martyrs and were honoured by receiving Tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

He moved to Tehran at the age of 17, attended Alborz High School, then moved to Shiraz to continue his higher education at the

Pahlavi University's Medical School. During his first year at that university, Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Akbar Furútan visited Shiraz and spent four months delivering a series of lectures aimed at deepening the knowledge and understanding of the friends in the verities of the Bahá'í Faith. Sensing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Heshmat decided to temporarily leave his medical studies and become available fulltime to accompany Mr. Furútan during that period. This decision would turn out to be pivotal and Heshmat looked upon this time as one of the most life-changing and significant experiences of his life. His transcriptions of Mr. Furútan's talks during that time in Shiraz filled three volumes, some of which can be found on the *Ayeneh-e-Jahan* website.

Heshmat went on to complete his education and become a renowned orthopaedic surgeon. He moved to the United States at the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, where he successfully continued his practice as a physician. He authored two widely-regarded textbooks on the subject of arthroscopic surgery, one of which was translated into Chinese.

Heshmat had a burning desire to teach and serve the Faith. It was his dream to visit the country and the people of Romania, the country of Queen Marie, who, at her time, was the only monarch to recognize Bahá'u'lláh and become a Bahá'í. He travelled to Romania six times and successfully acquired a great number of copies of Queen Marie's letters as well as relics from the Museum's archives which he then donated to the Bahá'í World Center. The greatest honour of his life was when during his visit to that country in December 1990, he was presented with the official written pronouncement of recognition of the Bahá'í Faith in Romania by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Dr. Shahriary then turned his attention to China, which is referred to by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "the country of the future." He travelled many times to China and achieved great results in his efforts over there. The crowning achievement of his work in China was undoubtedly the establishment of the Center for Bahá'í Studies in Beijing, through the support of Pride, a non-profit organization. The establishment of this Center was a-dream-come-true for Heshmat.

In both Romania and China he organized seminars in the field of orthopaedic medicine where he shared and taught the techniques of arthroscopic surgery, a field in which he was widely acknowledged to be one of the original pioneers.

In addition to his travels, Dr Shahriary developed a genuine relationship with the Persian media, opening channels of communications that would clear up common and widely-held misunderstandings about the Bahá'í Faith. He worked towards this goal tirelessly and passionately until the end of his life.

He retired from his medical practice in 2007 after a car accident. Guided and encouraged by the Universal House of Justice, he embarked on what would be his last great service to a Faith he loved and served his entire life: publishing a magazine entitled *Ayeneh-e Jahan*.

The last decade of his life saw him participating actively in the 'Irfán Colloquium. He devoted many joyful hours pouring his energy and scholarship into studies and research for preparing scholarly presentations for annual sessions of that colloquium until fatigue and poor health prevented him from pursuing his research. On April 19, 2018, he left his earthly life as he lived it: peacefully and with great dignity.



## Appendices

### Bibliography of the Bahá'í Writings and Their Abbreviations used in this book

<b>ABL</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>'Abdu'l-Bahá in London</i>
<b>ADJ</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Advent of Divine Justice</i>
<b>ADP</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy</i>
<b>BA</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Bahá'í Administration</i>
<b>BK</b>	Compilation, <i>Bahíyyih Khánum</i>
<b>BP</b>	Compilation, <i>Bahá'í Prayers</i>
<b>BS</b>	Compilation, <i>Bahá'í Scriptures</i>
<b>BWF</b>	Compilation, <i>Bahá'í World Faith</i>
<b>CC1-3</b>	<i>Compilation of Compilations</i> , volumes 1-3
<b>CF</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Citadel of Faith</i>
<b>DG</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Directives from the Guardian</i>
<b>ESW</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Epistle to the Son of the Wolf</i>
<b>FWU</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Foundations of World Unity</i>
<b>GDM</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Gems of Divine Mysteries</i>
<b>GPB</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>God Passes By</i>
<b>GWB</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
<b>HW</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Hidden Words</i>
<b>JWTA</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Japan Will Turn Ablaze</i>
<b>KA</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
<b>KI</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Kitáb-i-Íqán</i>
<b>LG</b>	Compilation, <i>Lights of Guidance</i>
<b>MBW</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957</i>
<b>MF</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Memorials of the Faithful</i>

<b>MOTC</b>	Compilation, <i>Ministry of the Custodians</i>
<b>MUHJ63</b>	<i>Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986</i>
<b>MUJH68</b>	<i>Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1968-1973</i>
<b>PB</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh</i>
<b>PDC</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Promised Day is Come</i>
<b>PM</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Prayers and Meditations</i>
<b>PT</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Paris Talks</i>
<b>PUP</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Promulgation of Universal Peace</i>
<b>SAQ</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Some Answered Questions</i>
<b>SDC</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Secret of Divine Civilization</i>
<b>SLH</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Summons of the Lord of Hosts</i>
<b>SVFV</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys</i>
<b>SWAB</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá</i>
<b>SWB</b>	The Báb, <i>Selections from the Writings of The Báb</i>
<b>TAB1-3</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas</i> , volumes 1-3
<b>TAF</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Tablet to Auguste Forel</i>
<b>TB</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>
<b>TDH</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>This Decisive Hour</i>
<b>TDP</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Tablets of the Divine Plan</i>
<b>TU</b>	Bahá'u'lláh, <i>Tabernacle of Unity</i>
<b>UD</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Unfolding Destiny</i>
<b>WOB</b>	Shoghi Effendi, <i>World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters</i>
<b>WT</b>	'Abdu'l-Bahá, <i>Will and Testament</i>

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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 grand-father, 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 2018 one hundred and fifty-two 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*.