

# Lights of 'Irfán



Papers Presented  
at the 'Irfán Colloquia  
and Seminars

Book Five

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‘Irfán Colloquia and Seminars



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*Papers Presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*  
*Book Five*  
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Quaff then, O My brother, from the living waters that We have caused to flow in the oceans of these words. Methinks the seas of grandeur are surging within them, and the gems of divine virtue are shining within and upon them. Divest then thyself of that which debarreth thee from this fathomless crimson sea, and to the cry of "In the name of God and by His grace!" immerse thyself therein. Let the fear of no one dismay thee. Trust in the Lord, thy God, for He is sufficient unto whosoever trusteth in Him. He, verily, shall protect thee, and in Him shalt thou abide in safety.

*Bahá'u'lláh, Gems of Divine Mysteries, #83*





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## Preface

*Lights of 'Irfán* is a collection of selected texts of the presentations made at various sessions of the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars. The current volume includes ten papers from a total of over forty presentations that were made at various sessions conducted in English in 2003. 'Irfán Colloquia started in 1993 and are held annually in North America and Europe in the English, German and Persian languages. The aim and purpose of the 'Irfán activities are to foster systematic studies of the scriptures of the world's religions from the Bahá'í perspective and to promote scholarly studies in the sacred writings, verities, and fundamental principles of the belief system of the Bahá'í Faith. 'Irfán activities are under the auspicious of the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís in the countries where they take place. 'Irfán is a Persian-Arabic word referring to mystical, theological, and spiritual knowledge and insight.

Starting in 2002, paper presenters were invited to consider contributing papers related to Philosophy, Science and the Bahá'í Faith. Some of the papers in Book Four and Book Five of the *Lights of 'Irfán* represent such studies. Another new category of papers that is now being added to the contents of the *Lights of 'Irfán* includes studies focused on a group of Tablets having a common point

of reference such as the Tablets revealed in honor of one individual, members of one family, a particular group of believers, the Bahá'ís in one geographical locality or to a specific institution. A third category covers studies focusing on how a specific concept or subject is described and presented in a group of Tablets. The present volume contains samples of these new categories of presentations. It is hoped that scholars will enrich these kinds of studies and contribute more such papers to be published in the *Lights of 'Irfán*.

Two papers, one on "An Initial Exploration of Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings" by Ian Kluge and the other on a comparison of Bahá'í principles of unity and progressive revelation with the basic concepts advanced by Teilhard de Chardin by Wolfgang Klebel, belong to the category on Philosophy and the Bahá'í Faith. They open new fields of study and discussion. The paper on the Images of Christ by Maryam Afshar represent studies on a particular topic as elucidated in the published English translation of the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. There are a number of such images that will emerge by undertaking similar studies in the Bahá'í Writings. Dominic Brookshaw's paper on the Tablets revealed in honor of the women of the Ibn-i Asdaq's household is an example of

studies focused on the Tablets revealed in honor of the members of a particular family.

Vahid Brown in his paper on Textual Resurrection discusses the radical notions of textuality underlying the Báb's Qur'anic commentaries. He draws upon categories from contemporary literary studies by providing a framework for his discussion and a brief reference to the history of Qur'anic commentary in Islam, and focuses on elements in Akhbari Shi'i religious thought that can be seen to underpin the Báb's novel approach to the Qur'anic text. He argues that the Báb's readings of the Qur'án were messianic performances, enunciations of an eschatological restoration of the Imam, the cosmos, and of the Qur'án itself. A kaleidoscope is an optical toy, a device in which beautiful colors and forms can be visually experienced. Stephen Lambden has named his paper a kaleidoscope. It presents a mix of notes relating to aspects of cosmology, angelology and color symbolism in Bábi-Bahá'í and other religious and mystical texts.

The paper by Sholeh Quinn examines that portion of Karím Khán Kirmání's *Irshadu'l-'Avám* that Bahá'u'lláh discusses in the Kitáb-i-Iqán, in the light of the section of the Kitáb-i-Iqán known as "Tablet of the True Seeker." Amin Egea in his presentation on "Chronicles of a Birth" examines the sources for Bábí and

Bahá'í history available in Spanish records covering the years 1844-1947. The year 1947 is when the Bahá'í Faith was established in Spain. In "Manifestations of God and Their Functions in Human History", Iscander Tinto writes about the terminology, purpose and mission, sufferings, functions, and the threefold reality of the Manifestations of God. The essay on "Service, Joy and Sacrifice" by James Thomas is a brief review of the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá available in English translation.

The section on Elucidations includes Dr. Muhammad Afnan's clarification of the printing error in two of the subtitles of the facsimile of the twenty Tablets of the Báb published at the beginning of *The Dawn-Breakers*.

All papers in this volume present the views and understandings of their authors. The texts of the papers are published as provided by the authors, without further editing. The writing styles and scholarly approaches are therefore different. Articles are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the author's surnames. Abstracts of all the presentations made at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars are published in a series of separate booklets.

Iraj Ayman  
Chicago, March 2004

# Images of Christ in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

*Maryam Afshar*

## Introduction

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His talks and letters addressed to the believers of the West often referred to Christ and to Christian subjects. His audience being in majority Christians could better relate to and understand the Master’s message through Christian examples.

This focus becomes particularly strong in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks given at table in ‘Akká during 1904-1906 to guests and pilgrims from Christian background. These talks have been compiled in *Some Answered Questions*.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started His journey to Europe in September 1911 and to the United States in April 1912 His goal was to proclaim for the first time the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh to the Christian West. Inevitably allusions to Christ were numerous. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was introducing Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings on common grounds with Christianity by using quotes from Jesus to make His point and then elaborate on His Father’s precepts.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has drawn parallels between Christ and Bahá’u’lláh and also He has elucidated the meaning of some of Christ’s words and explained the main traditional Christian doctrine such as the

birth of Christ, baptism, trinity, the symbolism of the bread and the wine, sacrifice for redeeming the original sin, resurrection, and the second coming of Christ. In doing so He has brought a new refreshing and eye opening view on these subjects.

The image of Christ that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has depicted in His talks and letters is multifarious. This presentation will examine the following facets: Christ, Manifestation of God, the Word of God, the Quickener of the world, the Educator-Teacher, the Promised Messiah of the Jews, the Unifier, and the Physician. The parallels between Christ and Bahá’u’lláh and the explanation of the main traditional Christian doctrines will also be covered.

## I. Images of Christ

### First image: Christ, Manifestation of God

Man, according to Abdu’l-Bahá, has received from God the gift of the intellect in order to be able to understand and benefit from Divine Guidance. The Manifestation of God has, like man, the rational soul but what differs is that He

is reflecting perfectly the attributes of God like a polished mirror. Christ likewise was imbued with divine knowledge and the power of the Spirit was apparent in him. He was detached from material life and willing to go through trials and hardships because He had this spiritual power in him that made him a perfect man, a Manifestation of God.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

*To man is given the special gift of the intellect by which he is able to receive a larger share of the light Divine. The Perfect Man is as a polished mirror reflecting the Sun of Truth, manifesting the attributes of God.*

*The Lord Christ said, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father’ – God manifested in man.*

*The sun does not leave his place in the heavens and descend into the mirror, for the actions of ascent and descent, coming and going, do not belong to the Infinite, they are the methods of finite beings. In the Manifestation of God, the perfectly polished mirror, appear the qualities of the Divine in a form that man is capable of comprehending.<sup>1</sup>*

*HE [Christ] is a Manifestation because He reflects in Himself the divine perfections. The Prophets of God are manifestations for the lordly perfections – that is, the Holy Spirit is apparent in Them.<sup>2</sup>*

*CHRIST was heavenly, divine and belonged to the world of the Kingdom. He was the embodiment of spiritual knowledge. . . . How is it*

*that He overlooked and denied Himself everything in this world? He attached little importance to this material life, denying Himself rest and composure, accepting trials and voluntarily suffering vicissitudes because He was endowed with spiritual susceptibilities and the power of the Holy Spirit. He beheld the splendors of the divine Kingdom, embodied the bounties of God and possessed ideal powers.<sup>3</sup>*

#### Second image: Christ the “glorious Word of God”<sup>4</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that a word is made of letters. Each letter by itself has no specific meaning; once put together, a complete word with a specific meaning becomes apparent. In the same manner the divine perfections manifested in Christ are like letters in a word, when all put together make Him the Manifestation of God, and therefore He is called the Word.

*MAN is the sum of Creation, and the Perfect Man is the expression of the complete thought of the Creator – the Word of God.<sup>5</sup>*

*[A]s Christ conveyed the perfect meaning of divine reality and embodied independent significance, He was the Word. He was as the station of reality compared to the station of metaphor. There is no intrinsic meaning in the leaves of a book, but the thought they convey leads you to reflect upon reality. The reality of Jesus was the perfect meaning, the Christhood in Him which in the Holy*

*Books is symbolized as the Word.*<sup>6</sup>

*As it is said in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God"; [John 1:1] then the Holy Spirit and the Word are the appearance of God. The Spirit and the Word mean the divine perfections that appeared in the Reality of Christ, and these perfections were with God; so the sun manifests all its glory in the mirror. For the Word does not signify the body of Christ, no, but the divine perfections manifested in Him. . . . The perfections of Christ are called the Word because all the beings are in the condition of letters, and one letter has not a complete meaning, while the perfections of Christ have the power of the word because a complete meaning can be inferred from a word. As the Reality of Christ was the manifestation of the divine perfections, therefore, it was like the word. Why? because He is the sum of perfect meanings. This is why He is called the Word.*<sup>7</sup>

### **Third image: Christ the "Son of the living God"**

*. . . CHRIST asked: Whom do you believe Me to be? and Peter answered: I believe that "Thou art the Son of the living God." . . . Christ wished by suggestion, or an allusion, to confirm the words of Peter; so on account of the suitability of his name, Peter, He said: "and upon this rock I will build My church," meaning, thy belief that Christ is the Son of the living God will be the foundation of the Religion of God, and upon this belief*

*the foundation of the church of God – which is the Law of God – shall be established.*<sup>8</sup>

*VERILY did the Pharisees rise up against Messiah . . . because He had claimed to be Almighty God, the sovereign Lord of all, and told them, 'I am God's Son, and verily in the inmost being of His only Son, His mighty Word, clearly revealed with all His attributes, all His perfections, standeth the Father.' . . .*

*Never would the Pharisees have been emboldened to calumniate Him and charge Him with that grievous sin, but for their ignorance of the inner core of mysteries and the fact that they paid no heed to His splendours and regarded not His proofs. Else would they have acknowledged His words . . .*

*Shouldst thou, however, turn thy gaze unto a Mirror, brilliant, stainless, and pure, wherein the divine Beauty is reflected, therein wilt thou find the Sun shining with Its rays, Its heat, Its disc, Its fair form all entire....*

*This is the meaning of the Messiah's words, that the Father is in the Son. . . .*

*Such were the words uttered by Christ. On account of these words they cavilled at and assailed Him when He said unto them, "Verily the Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son."<sup>9</sup>*

*In another passage 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:*

*LET us investigate independently the*



*reality of this matter. What is the meaning of the father and the son? We say that this fatherhood and sonship are allegorical and symbolical. The Messianic reality is like unto a mirror through which the sun of divinity has become resplendent. If this mirror expresses, "The light is in me" – it is sincere in its claim, therefore Jesus was truthful when he said "The Father is in me." The sun which is in the sky and the sun in the mirror are one, are they not? – and yet we see there are apparently two suns.*<sup>10</sup>

#### Fourth image: Christ as the Quickener of the World

Christ was called the Quickener of the World because He had the capacity to shake people, touch their hearts and transform their lives. The coming of any Manifestation shakes the world in its own ways. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the coming of Christ very tenderly and yet in a powerful manner:

*WHEN Christ appeared in this world, it was like the vernal bounty . . . the human world found new life.*<sup>11</sup>

*. . . [I]t caused a great commotion and vibrant movement in the world of humanity. The Sun of Reality dawned, the cloud of mercy poured down its rain, the breezes of providence moved, the world became a new world, mankind reflected an extraordinary radiance, souls were educated, minds were developed, intelligences became acute, and the human world attained a new freshness of life, like unto the advent of*

*spring.*<sup>12</sup>

*...[T]o gain control over physical bodies is an extremely easy matter, but to bring spirits within the bonds of serenity is a most arduous undertaking. . . . It necessitates a divine and holy potency, the potency of inspiration, the power of the Holy Spirit. For example, Christ was capable of leading spirits into that abode of serenity. He was capable of guiding hearts into that haven of rest. From the day of His manifestation to the present time He has been resuscitating hearts and quickening spirits. He has exercised that vivifying influence in the realm of hearts and spirits; therefore, His resuscitating is everlasting.*<sup>13</sup>

#### Fifth image: Christ the Teacher-Educator

Christ through His example and teachings educated the various nations of His time; He started with twelve followers and later His teachings were spread all over the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá shows us how Christ was a true educator. He states:

*ALL the Prophets of God, including Jesus Christ, appeared in the world for the education of humanity, to develop immature souls into maturity, to transform the ignorant of mankind into the knowing, thereby establishing love and unity through divine education and training.*<sup>14</sup>

*CONSIDER the days of Christ: how the light of guidance brightened twelve*

hearts. How limited it seemed, but how expansive it became afterward and illumined the world!<sup>15</sup>

. . . CHRIST educated and developed mankind universally. He rescued nations and peoples from the bondage of superstition and idolatry. He summoned them all to the knowledge of the oneness of God. They were dark, they became illumined; they were material, they became spiritual; earthly they were, they became heavenly. He enlightened the world of morality.<sup>16</sup>

JESUS Christ was an Educator of humanity. His teachings were altruistic; His bestowal, universal. He taught mankind by the power of the Holy Spirit and not through human agency, for the human power is limited, whereas the divine power is illimitable and infinite.<sup>17</sup>

JESUS Christ came to teach the people of the world this heavenly civilization and not material civilization. He breathed the breath of the Holy Spirit into the body of the world and established an illumined civilization. Among the principles of divine civilization He came to proclaim is the Most Great Peace of mankind. Among His principles of spiritual civilization is the oneness of the kingdom of humanity. Among the principles of heavenly civilization He brought is the virtue of the human world. Among the principles of celestial civilization He announced is the improvement and betterment of human morals.<sup>18</sup>

HE was a real Educator, the Instructor of reality.<sup>19</sup>

DURING the ministry of Jesus Christ in Palestine He was surrounded by people of various nations, including the Jews, all of them living in the condition of extreme ignorance, bereft of the Word of God and darkened in consciousness. Christ educated these people and quickened them with the life of the Word so that they in turn became the instruments of educating the world, illumining the East and the West.<sup>20</sup>

THE Jews had become dispersed and widely scattered. This single and unique Personage overcame all the then known world, founding an everlasting sovereignty, a mighty nation indeed. Such a result proved Him to be a great man, the first Educator of His time, the first Teacher of His period.<sup>21</sup>

### Sixth image: Christ the Promised Messiah of the Jews

The Jews failed to recognize Christ as the Promised Messiah; they were so blinded by their superstitions and imitations that they missed His coming. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

[T]HE Hebrew prophets were sent to announce Christ, but unfortunately the Talmud and its superstitions veiled Him so completely that they crucified their promised Messiah. Had they renounced the talmudic traditions and investigated the reality of the religion of Moses, they would

*have become believers in Christ.*<sup>22</sup>

*It is easy to read the Holy Scriptures, but it is only with a clean heart and a pure mind that one may understand their true meaning.*<sup>23</sup>

*CONSIDER the symbolical meanings of the Words and teachings of Christ. He said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever." When the Jews heard this, they took it literally and failed to understand the significance of His meaning and teaching. The spiritual truth which Christ wished to convey to them was that the reality of Divinity within Him was like a blessing which had come down from heaven and that he who partook of this blessing should never die. That is to say, bread was the symbol of the perfections which had descended upon Him from God, and he who ate of this bread, or endowed himself with the perfections of Christ, would undoubtedly attain to everlasting life.*<sup>24</sup>

*THE Jews were expecting the appearance of the Messiah, looking forward to it with devotion of heart and soul, but because they were submerged in imitations, they did not believe in Jesus Christ when He appeared.*<sup>25</sup>

### **Seventh image: Christ, the one who brought Unity and Love**

Christ brought together many different peoples of His time; they were able to live next to each other in harmony and love. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*ALL the Prophets have striven to make love manifest in the hearts of men. Jesus Christ sought to create this love in the hearts.*<sup>26</sup>

*CHRIST appeared in this world nineteen hundred years ago to establish ties of unity and bonds of love between the various nations and different communities. He cemented together the sciences of Rome and the splendors of the civilization of Greece. He also accomplished affiliation between the Assyrian kingdom and the power of Egypt. The blending of these nations in unity, love and agreement had been impossible, but Christ through divine power established this condition among the children of men.*<sup>27</sup>

*CONSIDER how many different nations and divergent religious beliefs existed when Christ appeared. Enmity and strife prevailed among them — Romans, Greeks, Assyrians, Egyptians — all warring and hostile toward each other. Christ, through the breaths of the Holy Spirit, united them, established fellowship among them so that no trace of strife remained. Under His standard they became united and lived in peace through His teachings.*<sup>28</sup>

*WHEN the Messianic star of Jesus Christ dawned, He declared He had come to gather together the lost tribes or scattered sheep of Moses. He not only shepherded the flock of Israel but brought together people of Chaldea, Egypt, Syria, ancient Assyria and Phoenicia. These people*

were in a state of utmost hostility, thirsting for the blood of each other with the ferocity of animals; but Jesus Christ brought them together, cemented and united them in His Cause and established such a bond of love among them that enmity and warfare were abandoned.<sup>29</sup>

*JESUS Christ established the religion of God through love. His sovereignty is everlasting. . . . Christ was a conqueror of human hearts. . . . Love is the eternal sovereignty. Love is the divine power.*<sup>30</sup>

*JESUS Christ was mercy itself, was love itself. He even prayed in behalf of His executioners – for those who crucified Him – saying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” If they knew what they were doing, they would not have done it. Consider how kind Jesus Christ was, that even upon the cross He prayed for His oppressors.*<sup>31</sup>

### **Eighth image: Christ the Physician**

Christ brought teachings for His time as a physician would prescribe a medicine. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*[I]N the day of Jesus Christ the world of humanity was afflicted with various ailments. Jesus Christ was the real Physician. He appeared, recognized the symptoms and prescribed the real remedy. What was that remedy? It was His revealed teaching especially applicable to that age.*<sup>32</sup>

## **II. Parallels between Christ and Bahá'u'lláh**

‘Abdu'l-Bahá expresses with beautiful images and in a very poetic language the similarities between Christ and Bahá'u'lláh. Here are some quotes.

### **First parallel: The teachings of the Prophets**

The Manifestations in every age brought teachings that with time have been forgotten or altered by material laws. Likewise Christ's guidance were introduced in a manner that people were not able to fathom the depth of them; Bahá'u'lláh explains those teachings and expands them to the whole world.

*THE Prophets and Manifestations of God bring always the same teaching; at first men cling to the Truth but after a time they disfigure it. The Truth is distorted by man-made outward forms and material laws. The veil of substance and worldliness is drawn across the reality of Truth.*

*As Moses and Jesus brought their Message to the people, so Bahá'u'lláh brings the same Message.*<sup>33</sup>

*KNOW that the attributes of perfection, the splendor of the divine bounties, and the lights of inspiration are visible and evident in all the Holy Manifestations; but the glorious Word of God, Christ, and the Greatest Name, Bahá'u'lláh, are manifestations and evidences which are beyond imagination, for they possess all perfections of former*

*Manifestations; and more than that, They possess some perfections which make other Manifestations dependent upon Them.*<sup>34</sup>

*TRUTH is one, and without division. The teachings of Jesus are in a concentrated form. Men do not agree to this day as to the meaning of many of His sayings. His teachings are as a flower in the bud. Today, the bud is unfolding into a flower! Bahá'u'lláh has expanded and fulfilled the teachings, and has applied them in detail to the whole world.*<sup>35</sup>

**Second parallel: The Teachings have always come from the East to the West**

*THE West has always received spiritual enlightenment from the East. . . . The Lord Christ arose as a bright Star in the Eastern sky, but the light of His Teaching shone more perfectly in the West . . .*<sup>36</sup>

*IT is a long time since the Sun of Truth mirrored forth by the Lord Christ has shed its radiance upon the West, for the Face of God has been veiled by the sin and forgetfulness of man. But now again, praise be to God, the Holy Spirit speaks anew to the world! The constellation of love and wisdom and power is once more shining from the Divine Horizon to give joy to all who turn their stifling the souls of men.*<sup>37</sup>

*IN the time of Jesus Christ there was an outpouring of the Light from East to West that brought the people*

*under a heavenly banner and illumined them with divine insight. Western lands have been kindled by the Light of the Christ.*<sup>38</sup>

*IN every age of great spiritual darkness, a light is kindled in the East. So once again the light of the teachings of God has come unto you. Even as education and progress travel from West to East, so does the spiritual fire travel from East to West.*<sup>39</sup>

**Third parallel: The light of the Prophet**

*WHEN the Lord Christ came He spread the light of the Holy Spirit on all around Him, and His disciples and all who received His illumination became enlightened, spiritual beings.*

*It was to manifest this light that Bahá'u'lláh was born, and came into the world. He taught Eternal Truth to men, and shed the rays of Divine Light in all lands.*<sup>40</sup>

**Fourth parallel: The trials of the Prophets**

*Christ and Bahá'u'lláh endured terrible trials.*

*WHY should all this suffering have been, if not to prove the everlasting life of the spirit?*<sup>41</sup>

*FROM the beginning of the world until the present time each 'Manifestation' [i.e. Divine Manifestation] sent from God has been opposed by an embodiment of the 'Powers of Darkness'. . . . In the day of Christ, Annas and Caiaphas inflamed the*

*Jewish people against Him and the learned doctors of Israel joined together to resist His Power. All sorts of calumnies were circulated against Him. . . .*

*Now, in our own day, history repeats itself.*

*Those who would have men believe that religion is their own private property once more bring their efforts to bear against the Sun of Truth: they resist the Command of God; they invent calumnies, not having arguments against it, neither proof. . . . They write all they can think of against the Divine Messenger, Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>42</sup>*

#### **Fifth parallel: The renewal of the Teachings**

*THE appearances of the Manifestations of God are the divine springtime. When Christ appeared in this world, it was like the vernal bounty. . . . Bahá'u'lláh has come into this world. He has renewed that springtime.<sup>43</sup>*

#### **Sixth Parallel: Christ and Bahá'u'lláh both founders of a spiritual civilization**

*JESUS Christ came to teach the people of the world this heavenly civilization. . . . Bahá'u'lláh appeared in [Persia] and founded the spiritual civilization.<sup>44</sup>*

#### **Seventh parallel: The Manifestation of God as a Physician**

*CHRIST was a heavenly Physician. He*

*brought spiritual health and healing into the world. Bahá'u'lláh is, likewise, a divine Physician. He has revealed prescriptions for removing disease from the body politic and has remedied human conditions by spiritual power.<sup>45</sup>*

#### **Eighth parallel: The promulgation of the teachings through disciples**

*WHEN Christ appeared, certain blessed souls followed His example.... After the ascension of Christ they hastened to various regions of the world, scattering broadcast the teachings and instructions which He had given them. Through their devotion and efforts other places and remote nations became informed of the principles revealed by Him. . . .*

*Now we have, likewise, come from the Orient, announcing the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh, Who shone from the horizon of the East. We have been witnesses of His ordeals and sufferings, observers of His imprisonment and exile. . . . [W]e who are His disciples have been scattered throughout the world in order that His teachings may be widespread and be heard by every ear.<sup>46</sup>*

### **III. Interpretation of some Christian Beliefs**

#### **1. The Birth of Christ**

**Q:** How was Christ born of the Holy Spirit?

**'Abdu'l-Bahá answers:**

*A: THE theologians believe that Christ was born of the Holy Spirit, but the materialists think his is impossible and inadmissible, and that without doubt He had a human father. . . .*

*[T]he theologians say: "This thing is not impossible and unachievable, but it has not been seen; and there is a great difference between a thing which is impossible and one which is unknown. . . . Is this globe eternal or phenomenal?" The materialists answer that, according to science and important discoveries, it is established that it is phenomenal. . . .*

*The theologians say: "Then from your statement it has become evident and clear that mankind is phenomenal upon the globe, and not eternal. Then surely the first man had neither father nor mother, for the existence of man is phenomenal. . . . [T]here can remain no doubt that a man without a human father is also possible and admissible; you cannot consider this impossible; otherwise, you are illogical."<sup>47</sup>*

*A great man is a great man, whether born of a human father or not. If being without a father is a virtue, Adam is greater and more excellent than all the Prophets and Messengers. . . . The honor and greatness of Christ is not due to the fact that He did not have a human father, but to His perfections, bounties and divine glory."<sup>48</sup>*

'Abdu'l-Bahá in another passage implies that Joseph was not the father of Christ. He states:

*JOSEPH was of the descendants of Jesse, the father of David; but as Christ found existence through the Spirit of God, He called Himself the Son of God."<sup>49</sup>*

The Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth is recognized by the Bahá'í Teachings, as Shoghi Effendi notes:

*THE Master clearly writes in a Tablet that Christ was not begotten in the ordinary way, but by the Holy Spirit. So we must accept this. Every Faith has some miracles, and this is the great miracle of the Christian faith."<sup>50</sup>*

## 2. Baptism

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains how during the time of John the Baptist this practice had a different meaning than today's meaning which has become only a custom.

*THE principle of baptism is purification by repentance. John admonished and exhorted the people, and caused them to repent; then he baptized them. Therefore, it is apparent that this baptism is a symbol of repentance from all sin: its meaning is expressed in these words: "O God! as my body has become purified and cleansed from physical impurities, in the same way purify and sanctify my spirit from the impurities of the world of nature, which are not worthy of the Threshold of Thy Unity!" Repentance is the return from disobedience to obedience. . . .*

*As Christ desired that this institution of John should be used at that time by all, He Himself conformed to it in order to awaken the people and*

to complete the law of the former religion. Although the ablution of repentance was the institution of John, it was in reality formerly practiced in the religion of God.

Christ was not in need of baptism; but as at that time it was an acceptable and praiseworthy action, and a sign of the glad tidings of the Kingdom, therefore, He confirmed it. However, afterward He said the true baptism is not with material water, but it must be with spirit and with water. In this case water does not signify material water, for elsewhere it is explicitly said baptism is with spirit and with fire, from which it is clear that the reference is not to material fire and material water, for baptism with fire is impossible.

Therefore, the spirit is the bounty of God, the water is knowledge and life, and the fire is the love of God. For material water does not purify the heart of man; no, it cleanses his body. But the heavenly water and spirit, which are knowledge and life, make the human heart good and pure; the heart which receives a portion of the bounty of the Spirit becomes sanctified, good and pure – that is to say, the reality of man becomes purified and sanctified from the impurities of the world of nature. These natural impurities are evil qualities: anger, lust, worldliness, pride, lying, hypocrisy, fraud, self-love, etc.

Man cannot free himself from the rage of the carnal passions except by the help of the Holy Spirit. That is why He says baptism with the spirit, with water and with fire is necessary, and that it is essential – that is to say, the spirit of divine bounty, the water

of knowledge and life, and the fire of the love of God. Man must be baptized with this spirit, this water and this fire so as to become filled with the eternal bounty. Otherwise, what is the use of baptizing with material water? No, this baptism with water was a symbol of repentance, and of seeking forgiveness of sins.

But in the cycle of Bahá'u'lláh there is no longer need of this symbol; for its reality, which is to be baptized with the spirit and love of God, is understood and established.<sup>51</sup>

### 3. The Trinity

The Three persons of the Christian Godhead (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) as constituting one God, is explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as follows:

*GOD is pure perfection, and creatures are but imperfections. For God to descend into the conditions of existence would be the greatest of imperfections; on the contrary, His manifestation, His appearance, His rising are like the reflection of the sun in a clear, pure, polished mirror. . . . [T]he Reality of Christ was a clear and polished mirror of the greatest purity and fineness. The Sun of Reality, the Essence of Divinity, reflected itself in this mirror and manifested its light and heat in it; but from the exaltation of its holiness, and the heaven of its sanctity, the Sun did not descend to dwell and abide in the mirror. . . .*

*This is why Christ said, "The Father is in the Son," meaning that the Sun is visible and manifest in this mirror.*

*The Holy Spirit is the Bounty of*



*God which becomes visible and evident in the Reality of Christ. The Sonship station is the heart of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the station of the spirit of Christ. Hence it has become certain and proved that the Essence of Divinity is absolutely unique and has no equal, no likeness, no equivalent.*<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. The symbolism of the bread and the wine

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

*THIS bread signifies the heavenly food and divine perfections. So, “If any man eateth of this bread” means if any man acquires heavenly bounty, receives the divine light, or partakes of Christ’s perfections, he thereby gains everlasting life. The blood also signifies the spirit of life and the divine perfections, the lordly splendor and eternal bounty. For all the members of the body gain vital substance from the circulation of the blood.*

*In the Gospel of St. John, chapter 6, verse 26, it is written: “Ye seek Me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.”*

*It is evident that the bread of which the disciples ate and were filled was the heavenly bounty; for in verse 33 of the same chapter it is said: “For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. . . .”*

*Reflect how clear it is that what Christ meant by the heavenly bread was His spirit, His bounties, His perfections and His teachings; for it is*

*said in the 63<sup>rd</sup> verse: “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing.”*

*Therefore, it is evident that the spirit of Christ is a heavenly grace which descends from heaven; whosoever receives light from that spirit in abundance — that is to say, the heavenly teachings — finds everlasting life. That is why it is said in the 35<sup>th</sup> verse: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.”*

*Notice that “coming to Him” He expresses as eating, and “belief in Him” as drinking. Then it is evident and established that the celestial food is the divine bounties, the spiritual splendors, the heavenly teachings, the universal meaning of Christ. To eat is to draw near to Him, and to drink is to believe in Him. . . .*

*The disciples had taken many meals from the hand of Christ; why was the last supper distinguished from the others? It is evident that the heavenly bread did not signify this material bread, but rather the divine nourishment of the spiritual body of Christ, the divine graces and heavenly perfections of which His disciples partook, and with which they became filled.*

*In the same way, reflect that when Christ blessed the bread and gave it to His disciples, saying, “This is My body,” [Matt. 26:26] and gave grace to them, He was with them in person, in presence, and form. He was not transformed into bread and wine; if He had been turned into bread and wine, He could not have remained with the disciples in body, in person*

and in presence.

*Then it is clear that the bread and wine were symbols which signified: I have given you My bounties and perfections, and when you have received this bounty, you have gained eternal life and have partaken of your share and your portion of the heavenly nourishment.*<sup>53</sup>

## 5. Sacrifice for redeeming the original sin

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains this concept through logic and reason. He states:

*THEY say that Adam disobeyed the command of God and partook of the fruit of the forbidden tree, thereby committing a sin which was transmitted as a heritage to His posterity. They teach that because of Adam’s sin all His descendants have, likewise, committed transgression and have become responsible through inheritance; that, consequently, all mankind deserves punishment and must make retribution; and that God sent forth His Son as a sacrifice in order that man might be forgiven and the human race delivered from the consequences of Adam’s transgression*

*We wish to consider these statements from the standpoint of reason. Could we conceive of the Divinity, Who is Justice itself, inflicting punishment upon the posterity of Adam for Adam’s own sin and disobedience? Even if we should see a governor, an earthly ruler punishing a son for the wrongdoing of his father, we would look upon that ruler as an unjust man. Granted the father com-*

*mitted a wrong, what was the wrong committed by the son? There is no connection between the two. Adam’s sin was not the sin of His posterity, especially as Adam is a thousand generations back of the man today. If the father of a thousand generations committed a sin, is it just to demand that the present generation should suffer the consequences thereof? . . . These interpretations and statements are due to a misunderstanding of the meanings of the Bible.*

*In order to understand the reality of sacrifice let us consider the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. It is true that He sacrificed Himself for our sake. What is the meaning of this? When Christ appeared, He knew that He must proclaim Himself in opposition to all the nations and peoples of the earth. He knew that mankind would arise against Him and inflict upon Him all manner of tribulations. There is no doubt that one who put forth such a claim as Christ announced would arouse the hostility of the world and be subjected to personal abuse. He realized that His blood would be shed and His body rent by violence. Notwithstanding His knowledge of what would befall Him, He arose to proclaim His message, suffered all tribulation and hardships from the people and finally offered His life as a sacrifice in order to illumine humanity — gave His blood in order to guide the world of mankind. He accepted every calamity and suffering in order to guide men to the truth. Had He desired to save His own life, and were He without wish to offer Himself in sacrifice, He would not have been able to guide a*

single soul. There was no doubt that His blessed blood would be shed and His body broken. Nevertheless, that Holy Soul accepted calamity and death in His love for mankind.<sup>54</sup>

## 6. The Resurrection of Christ

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*THE resurrections of the Divine Manifestations are not of the body. All Their states, Their conditions, Their acts, the things They have established, Their teachings, Their expressions, Their parables and Their instructions have a spiritual and divine signification, and have no connection with material things. . . .*

*[Christ's] disappearance under the earth for three days has an inner signification and is not an outward fact. In the same way, His resurrection from the interior of the earth is also symbolical; it is a spiritual and divine fact, and not material; and likewise His ascension to heaven is a spiritual and not material ascension. . . .*

*Therefore, we say that the meaning of Christ's resurrection is as follows: the disciples were troubled and agitated after the martyrdom of Christ. The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and was not resplendent and manifest. No, rather it was lost, for the believers were few in number and were troubled and agitated. The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body; and when after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and*

*began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body until the life and the bounty of the Holy Spirit surrounded it.<sup>55</sup>*

## 7. The return of Christ

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*CHRIST was the Sun of Reality which shone from the heavenly horizon of Christianity, training, protecting, confirming minds, souls and spirits until they came into harmony with the divine Kingdom and attained capacity for descent of the infinite bounties of God. Were it not for the appearance of His splendor, they would have remained in the darkness of imperfection and remoteness from God. But because that Sun of Reality shone forth and flooded its light into the world of minds, souls and spirits, they became radiant. He conferred a new and eternal life upon them. . . .*

*There is a day and a night in the world of spirituality. After each departure there is a return and the dawning light of a new day.<sup>56</sup>*

*IN the Divine Scriptures and Holy Books "return" is spoken of, but the ignorant have not understood the meaning, and those who believed in reincarnation have made conjectures on the subject. For what the divine Prophets meant by "return" is not the*

return of the essence, but that of the qualities; it is not the return of the Manifestation, but that of the perfections.<sup>57</sup>

*KNOW that the return of Christ for a second time doth not mean what the people believed, but rather, signifieth that One promised to come after Him.*<sup>58</sup>

I would like now to conclude with quotations from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that summarize the image of Christ.

*As the sun is to the body of a man so is the Sun of Truth to his soul.*

*A man may have attained to a high degree of material progress, but without the light of truth his soul is stunted and starved. . . . The Christian Teaching was illumined by the Divine Sun of Truth. . . .*

*If the followers of the Lord Christ had continued to follow out these principles with steadfast faithfulness, there would have been no need for a renewal of the Christian Message....*<sup>59</sup>

*. . . CHRIST appeared in order to illumine the world of humanity, to render the earthly world celestial, to make the human kingdom a realm of angels, to unite the hearts, to enkindle the light of love in human souls, so that such souls might become independent, attaining complete unity and fellowship, turning to God, entering into the divine Kingdom, receiving the bounties and bestowals of God and partaking of the manna from heaven.*<sup>60</sup>

*THIS young Man, Christ, by the help of a supernatural power, abrogated*

*the ancient Mosaic Law, reformed the general morals, and once again laid the foundation of eternal glory for the Israelites. Moreover, He brought to humanity the glad tidings of universal peace, and spread abroad teachings which were not for Israel alone but were for the general happiness of the whole human race. . . .*

*[I]t becomes clear and evident that this Glorious Being was a true Educator of the world of humanity, and that He was helped and confirmed by divine power.*<sup>61</sup>

### Notes

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 13.
2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 127.
3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 312.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 149.
5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 43-44.
6. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 155.
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 206-207.
8. *Ibid.* p. 135.
9. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, pp. 40-42.
10. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, rev. ed.
11. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 10.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 54-55.
13. *Ibid.* p. 277.
14. *Ibid.* p. 40.
15. *Ibid.* p. 194.
16. *Ibid.* p. 206.
17. *Ibid.* p. 85.
18. *Ibid.* p. 11.
19. *Ibid.* p. 401.
20. *Ibid.* p. 331.
21. *Ibid.* p. 412.
22. *Ibid.* p. 16.

23. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 49.
24. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 459.
25. Ibid. p. 180.
26. Ibid. p. 15.
27. Ibid. p. 18.
28. Ibid. p. 42.
29. Ibid. p. 117.
30. Ibid. p. 211.
31. Ibid. p. 42.
32. Ibid. p. 204.
33. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘*Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 57.
34. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 149-150.
35. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘*Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 92.
36. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 23.
37. Ibid. p. 24.
38. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘*Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 48.
39. Ibid. p. 49.
40. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 59.
41. Ibid. p. 93.
42. Ibid. pp. 101-103.
43. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 10.
44. Ibid. pp. 11-12.
45. Ibid. p. 249.
46. Ibid. pp. 370-371.
47. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 87-88.
48. Ibid. p. 89.
49. Ibid. pp. 62-63.
50. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 23 December 1948, in the International Bahá’í Archives. Quoted in *A Study Guide to the Kitáb-i-Íqán* by Hooper Dunbar.
51. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 91-92.
52. Ibid. p. 113.
53. Ibid. pp. 97-99.
54. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 449-450.
55. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 103.
56. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 271.

57. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 288.
58. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Abbas*, p. 138.
59. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 21-22.
60. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 443.
61. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 16.

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## Letters to Bahá'í princesses

### Tablets revealed in honour of the women of Ibn-i Asdaq's household

*Dominic Parviz Brookshaw*

#### Introduction

**T**his article discusses some of the major themes of the tablets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the women of Ibn-i Asdaq's household: his wife, Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájiyyih (ca. 1861-1923); his mother-in-law, Shahansháh Baygum (ca. 1835-1918); his sister-in-law, Ághá Sháhzádiḥ (b. ca. 1850); and his four daughters, Laqá'iiyyih (b. 1886), Huviyya (b. ca. 1888), Rúḥá (b. ca. 1894) and Ṭalí'ih. (b. ca. 1896).<sup>1</sup> Before discussing the circumstances of the conversion of these women to the Bahá'í religion, brief biographies for Ibn-i Aşdaq and his father, Mullá Şádiq Khurásání, will be presented to help locate these women within the 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Iranian Bahá'í community.

Mírzá 'Alí-Muḥammad, Ibn-i Aşdaq (ca. 1850-1928) was the son of the early Bábí-Bahá'í teacher, Mullá Şádiq Muqaddas Khurásání. As a child (ca. 1861), Ibn-i Aşdaq visited Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad with his father. Soon after returning to Iran, father and son were imprisoned in Tehran, where they remained for more than two years and both underwent intermittent torture.<sup>2</sup> Whilst in prison, Ibn-i Aşdaq fell ill and

was treated by Ḥakím Masíḥ, who, through contact with Mullá Şádiq, became one of the first Iranian Jews to accept the new religion. As a young man, Ibn-i Aşdaq once again entered the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, this time in 'Akká. Ibn-i Aşdaq wrote to Bahá'u'lláh expressing his desire to be martyred for his faith. Bahá'u'lláh replied, explaining that martyrdom does not necessarily mean the shedding of blood and, in 1882, Bahá'u'lláh conferred the station of martyrdom upon Ibn-i Aşdaq by giving him the title "Shahíd, Ibn-i Shahíd" ("Martyr, Son of Martyr") in recognition of his tireless efforts to promote and propagate the Bahá'í religion in Iran. Ibn-i Aşdaq often used this title when corresponding with other believers. In 1887, Bahá'u'lláh named Ibn-i Aşdaq as one of the first four Hands of the Cause of God (*Ayádí-yi Amr'ulláh*). Along with the other three Hands appointed by Bahá'u'lláh, Ibn-i Aşdaq served on the first Consultative Assembly of Tehran, which was founded around 1897. Following the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in May 1892, Ibn-i Aşdaq, along with the other Hands, travelled throughout Iran to help gain the community's firm alle-

giance to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Through his wife’s family, Ibn-i Aşdaq was able to represent the Bahá’í Faith to leading members of Iranian society, something he was encouraged to do by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Ibn-i Aşdaq travelled extensively in India, Burma, the Caucasus, Transoxiana and parts of the Arab world to deepen new believers and help them liaise with the local authorities. In 1919 he travelled to Holland to deliver ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to the Central Organisation for a Durable Peace at the Hague. Ibn-i Aşdaq visited the Holy Land on several occasions as a pilgrim. His last stay in Haifa lasted over two years and ended shortly before the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in November 1921. Following the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ibn-i Aşdaq devoted himself to Shoghi Effendi, who subsequently named him as one of the Apostles of Bahá’u’lláh. Ibn-i Aşdaq passed away in 1928 and was buried in Tehran.<sup>3</sup>

Mullá Şádiq Khurásání, Ism’ulláhu’l-Aşdaq (d. 1889), son of Mírzá Ismá’íl Khurásání, was born into a Mashhadí clerical family some time in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Mullá Şádiq became known in Khurásán by the honorific title “Muqaddas” (“holy”) on account of his exceptional piety. Mullá Şádiq moved to Iraq in the late 1830s and studied under the Shaykhí leader, Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, in Karbalá, rising to the rank of *mujtahid* shortly before the passing of his teacher in 1843-44. Mullá Şádiq met the Báb on several occasions in Iraq and even offered to supervise the Báb’s religious studies, although the Báb’s uncle decided instead to send his young nephew back to

Shiraz. Mullá Şádiq met Mullá Ḥusayn Bushrú’í in Isfahan (who was on his way to Tehran, where he met Bahá’u’lláh) in the early summer of 1844. Mullá Şádiq independently recognised the Báb through a vision and immediately left for Shiraz. By the time he arrived in Shiraz, the Báb had already left for Mecca. Mullá Şádiq became an *imám jum‘a* (leader of congregational prayers) at one of the important mosques of the city, and when, in 1845, he complied with the order of the Báb to add a phrase to the call to prayer, he, together with Quddús, was mobbed by the congregation, arrested and interrogated by the governor. Following their interrogation, Mullá Şádiq and Quddús together became the first Bábís to be tortured publicly in Iran for their faith. Subsequently, Mullá Şádiq was expelled from Shiraz, from whence he travelled to Yazd and Kirman where he converted some clerics and relatives of the Báb to the new religion and debated with the Shaykhís. Mullá Şádiq was one of the few Bábís who fought at Shaykh Ṭabarsí in Mázarandarán to survive the ordeal. He was spared execution on account of his erudition and learning. As mentioned above, he visited Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad around 1861 and recognised Him as “He Whom God shall make manifest” (*man yuẓhiru-hu Alláh*). Following his return to Iran, Mullá Şádiq was imprisoned for twenty-eight months, only to be released by Náṣiru’d-Dín Sháh. After his release, Mullá Şádiq spent a number of days at the home of Muḥammad-Valí Mírzá (d. 1864), fourth son of Fath-‘Alí Sháh, where he debated

with notable clerics of Tehran, including Mullá 'Alí Kaní and Sayyid Şádiq Sanglají. Náşiru'd-Dín Sháh's mother, the Mahd-i 'Ulyá', attended some of these debates with other women of the court, listening to the proceedings from behind a curtain. She was so impressed by Mullá Şádiq that she offered him fine gifts, as did the Shah himself. Mullá Şádiq graciously declined these gifts and returned to Khurásán, where he continued to promote the Bábí (and later Bahá'í) religion. Until his death at Hamadan in 1889, Mullá Şádiq remained faithful to Bahá'u'lláh, visiting Him again in 'Akká towards the end of his life. Bahá'u'lláh gave Mullá Şádiq the honorific title "Ism'ulláhu'l-Aşdaq" ("the Name of God, the Most Truthful") and, after his death, was named as a Hand of the Cause by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.<sup>4</sup>

The first of the women of Ibn-i Aşdaq's wife's family to declare was his sister-in-law, Ághá Sháhzádi. She was the eldest child of Mírzá Muḥammad Háshim Qáđi Ṭabátabá'í and Shahansháh Baygum, the eldest child of Mírzá Mas'úd Anşarí Garmrúdí and Fath-'Alí Sháh's seventh daughter, Sháh Baygum, Ḍiyá'u's-Saltānih.<sup>5</sup> Ághá Sháhzádi became Bahá'í through her husband, Sayyid 'Abd'ulláh, Intizámu's-Saltānih, who himself had been converted to the new religion by the family doctor, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Khán, Munajjim-báshí.<sup>6</sup> Ághá Sháhzádi appears to have become a Bahá'í some time in the late 1870s, soon followed by her mother and younger sister, 'Udhrá Khánum, Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájjiyyih.<sup>7</sup> At some point after

her conversion, Bahá'u'lláh gave Ághá Sháhzádi the honorific name of "Badí'ih" ("wondrous" or "unique").<sup>8</sup> The first part of her given name, "Ághá", is the archaic female equivalent of the common male title "Áqá" ("mister"). When addressing Ághá Sháhzádi, however, Bahá'u'lláh raises her to the level of an honorary man by spelling the first part of her name with a "q", rather than "gh". In a heavily patriarchal society such as that of Qájár Iran, this small detail would have seemed a great honour.<sup>9</sup>

Some time soon after her conversion to the Bahá'í religion, Shahansháh Baygum and her youngest daughter 'Udhrá Khánum, went on pilgrimage to Mecca with other Qájár women, which is presumably how 'Udhrá Khánum gained her honorific title by which both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed her, "Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájjiyyih".<sup>10</sup> Shortly before or after the Ḥajj, Shahansháh Baygum married her second husband, Mírzá Ma'súm Khán Anşarí, Muntakhabu'd-Dawlih, a Muslim relative of her first husband, who held a high government position in Mashhad, Khurásán. Shahansháh Baygum moved from Tehran to Mashhad with her new husband and her youngest, unmarried daughter Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájjiyyih some time around 1880. Before leaving for Khurásán, Shahansháh Baygum had been put in touch with Ibn-i Aşdaq, the outstanding Bahá'í teacher (*muballigh*) of Khurásán, through Munajjim-báshí who had converted Ághá Sháhzádi's husband to the Bahá'í religion. Soon after arriving in Mashhad, Ibn-i Aşdaq began to visit Shahansháh Baygum and Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájjiyy-



ih on a regular basis to deepen them in their new faith. Ibn-i Aşdaq, who had been married previously to Mullá Husayn Bushrú'í's niece (who was now deceased), soon proposed to Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih. The couple were secretly married and left Mashhad for Tehran, where they settled near Khiyábán-i Amíriyyih, a new avenue in the west of the capital in a house prepared for them by Intizámu's-Saltānih and Ághá Sháhzádih, some time around 1882.<sup>11</sup>

Ibn-i Aşdaq and Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih had four children (all daughters): Laqá'īyyih, Huviyyih, Rúhā and Ṭalí'ih. The eldest, Laqá'īyyih (b. 1886), married Hidáyatu'lláh Mudabbir (Mudír-i Kháqán), the son of one of the early Bahá'ís of Rasht, Mudabbiru'l-Mamálík. Huviyyih (b. ca. 1888) married 'Ináyatu'lláh Farzár, the son of Áqá Muḥammad Karím 'Attár and Ibn-i Aşdaq's sister, Shamsu'l-Jahán. Rúhā (b. ca. 1894) married Músá Khudádúst, a Bahá'í doctor from Shiraz, and Ṭalí'ih (b. ca. 1896) married Luṭfu'lláh Munajjim, the grandson of Munajjim-báshí who had originally converted Intizámu's-Saltānih to the Bahá'í religion.

In 1913-14 Ibn-i Aşdaq, Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih and their three younger daughters spent seventy-two days in the Holy Land as guests of the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Laqá'īyyih, who had several young children, could not join them and so stayed in Rasht where she also cared for Huviyyih's infant child so that she might benefit from the bounty of pilgrimage.<sup>12</sup> Rúhā's account of this pilgrimage (*Yik 'Umr, Yik Kháṭirih*) is replete with evi-

dence of how close the family of Ibn-i Aşdaq was to that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with Whom they corresponded regularly. Shahansháh Baygum (ca. 1835-1919) was too frail to join the family on pilgrimage and stayed behind in Tehran. When they returned, Ibn-i Aşdaq's family brought with them a *táj* (white headdress) which had belonged to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and which 'Abdu'l-Bahá had sent as a gift for Shahansháh Baygum.

### The Tablets

To date, I have managed to locate thirty-nine tablets revealed in honour of the women of Ibn-i Aşdaq's household and his wife's female relatives, most of which have neither been published nor translated. According to my figures, Bahá'u'lláh revealed at least ten tablets (five of which include separate Arabic prayers) to Ághá Sháhzádih; five tablets to Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih (two of which contain separate Arabic prayers); two tablets to Laqá'īyyih and a further two tablets to Huviyyih (giving a total of nineteen tablets). Abdu'l-Bahá revealed at least twenty tablets to these women; two for Ághá Sháhzádih (one being an Arabic tablet of visitation following her passing); ten for Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih; two for Shahansháh Baygum (one an Arabic tablet of visitation in her honour); one for Laqá'īyyih; two for Huviyyih; one for Rúhā; one for Huviyyih, Rúhā and Ṭalí'ih together, one for Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih, Shahansháh Baygum and Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih's four daughters and at least two for Dīyá'u'l-Hájīyyih and her daugh-

ters.<sup>13</sup>

As one might expect, Bahá'u'lláh revealed proportionally more Arabic tablets to these women than 'Abdu'l-Bahá, although both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá also revealed Persian tablets to them. Ághá Sháhzádiḥ received more tablets in Arabic than her sister, Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, which may suggest that Ághá Sháhzádiḥ had a better working knowledge of Arabic than her younger sister, which may have been the case.<sup>14</sup> It seems likely, however, given that their maternal grandmother, Princess Ḍiyá'u's-Saltāniḥ, was an accomplished poet and calligrapher who wrote a number of Qur'áns in her own hand, that both sisters would have been able to read and understand Arabic well. According to Rúḥá, her maternal grandmother, Shahansháh Baygum, (Ḍiyá'u's-Saltāniḥ's eldest child) taught the daughters of Ibn-i Aşdaq Arabic.<sup>15</sup> Ibn-i Aşdaq had an excellent command of Arabic, as had his father, Mullá Şádiq, who had been a prominent Shaykhí *mujtahid* and prayer leader before recognising the Báb. There can be little doubt, therefore, that Ibn-i Aşdaq himself would have also trained his daughters in reading Arabic tablets.<sup>16</sup>

Persian was, however, without question, more readily understandable than Arabic, and tablets revealed in Persian could be circulated more readily among the Bahá'í women of Tehran for study and recitation than those revealed in Arabic.<sup>17</sup> Arabic was, however, regarded as the liturgical language par excellence

by the majority of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iranians, and so short Arabic prayers may well have been learnt by heart to be recited either privately or at organised gatherings. Here are two Arabic prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the first for Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, the second for Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih:

*Praise be to You, O God my God,  
that You have illumined my heart  
with the light of Your knowledge  
and have assisted me to recognise  
the Horizon of Your verses and  
the Dawning-place of your utter-  
ances. I ask You to enable me to  
remain steadfast in Your love and  
in Your cause. O my Lord! You see  
Your handmaiden clinging to the  
cord of Your bounty and holding  
fast to the hem of the cloak of  
Your mercy. I ask You not to  
deprive her of that which You  
have decreed for Your leaves and  
handmaidens who have circled  
round Your mighty throne and  
lofty station. Praise be to You at  
all times, O God of the world and  
Desire of the nations and Beloved  
of the hearts of the knowers.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>18</sup>

*Might is Yours, O You in whose  
grasp are the reins of power!  
Strength is Yours, O You through  
Whom the call was raised upon  
Sinai! Power is Yours, O You in  
Whose hands are the reins of free  
will! I ask You by the splendours  
of the lights of the Sun of Your  
bounty and by the hearts which  
have melted in love for You to  
assist me to be steadfast in Your  
Cause and to raise me up in Your  
Name among Your handmaidens*

*and Your leaves, midst Your close companions and Your servants. In truth, You are the Powerful, the Mighty, the Ever-generous.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>19</sup>

Another point of interest is that Ibn-i Aşdaq's two elder daughters, Laqá'iyih (b. 1886) and Huviyyih (b. ca. 1888), each received at least two tablets from Bahá'u'lláh. This must have been a great honour for children who would have barely reached the ages of six and four respectively at the time of Bahá'u'lláh's passing.<sup>20</sup>

Similar tablets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to other Bahá'í women can be found in *Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (volume 7), *Áyát-i Iláhí* (daily readings from the tablets of Bahá'u'lláh),<sup>21</sup> *Yarán-i Pársí* (tablets to Zoroastrian Bahá'ís)<sup>22</sup> and *Áyát-i Bayyinát* (tablets revealed in honour of the Samandarí family).<sup>23</sup> A number of extracts from such tablets have been translated and published in the compilation on women, prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice.<sup>24</sup>

### On the revelation of writings in their honour

Some of these Tablets are short, whilst others are relatively long and discursive. Since Ághá Sháhzádiḥ (the first of the women to convert), became Bahá'í some time in the late 1870s, the tablets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in honour of these women must date from the 'Akká period of His revelation (1868-1892).

Ághá Sháhzádiḥ died some time during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá ('Abdu'l-Bahá revealed a Tablet of visitation after her passing), but before the autumn of 1913 when the family were invited to visit the Holy Family in Haifa.<sup>25</sup>

In an Arabic Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh addresses Ághá Sháhzádiḥ from 'Akká, saying:

*O My handmaiden! Listen! Listen!  
The Wronged One is calling you  
from the prison with a call sweet-  
er than sugar and more luminous  
than the sun and moon.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>26</sup>

In a Persian Tablet addressed to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*. . . And so these hidden pearls  
and stored gems which were in the  
Oman of the utterances (bayán) of  
the Desire of the peoples of the  
world were revealed so that you  
might receive them.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>27</sup>

In a number of these Tablets we find references to the letters (now, presumably no longer extant) sent by Ághá Sháhzádiḥ and the other women of the family to Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*She has sent to the Dawning-place  
of Your revelation and the  
Horizon of Your divine inspira-  
tion that which indicates she has  
turned towards You and heard  
Your call and faced in Your direc-  
tion and submitted to Your sover-  
eignty and bowed down before*

*Your Cause.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>28</sup>

This extract suggests that Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, once having converted to the Bahá'í religion, wrote to Bahá'u'lláh directly to express her allegiance to Him. In at least two other Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh mentions that He has received correspondence from Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, whether directly or indirectly, conveyed via pilgrims from Tehran.<sup>29</sup> In an Arabic Tablet revealed to Huviyyih, who at the time was a child of barely four years of age, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Thank your Lord, the Imprisoned One, the Wronged One, that He, in the midst of sorrows, has made mention of you through that which has caused the mountains to shake.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>30</sup>

In many of these tablets, Bahá'u'lláh mentions how, after recognising His station, the women have been honoured with receiving tablets and prayers revealed specifically for them. In a Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ He writes:

*O My leaf! I bear witness that you have attained My days and turned towards My horizon and drunk the wine (raḥīq) of revelation from the hand of My bounty and, with the hand of submission, taken hold of My tablet and My writings. Blessed are you and whosoever has attained to this mighty and unique Cause, through which the light has shone from the horizon of manifestation (zuhúr) and the Sidratu'l-Muntahá has given glad*

*tidings to all mankind.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>31</sup>

And again to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the significance of the revelation of tablets in the honour of His believers:

*Mention of you has been made at the throne of God ('arsh) and this tablet was revealed for you in which your name has been recorded in the tablets . . . We have revealed for you verses (áyát) and sent them to you so that you may find from them the scent of the shirt of your Lord, the Mighty, the Bounteous. Glory be upon you and upon every handmaiden who has turned towards God, the Revealer of verses.<sup>32</sup>*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>33</sup>

The joy felt by the recipients of tablets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá must have been immense. Such tablets played a vital role in strengthening the resolve of early believers in the face of intense opposition to the Bahá'í movement in Iran and elsewhere, and would have acted as an effective morale booster for more marginalized elements of the nascent community, in particular women. To Ághá Sháhzádiḥ Bahá'u'lláh writes these words of encouragement:

*God willing that leaf is immersed and swimming in the depths of the sea of oneness and detachment. This station is most great; this is what God meant by "patience is beautiful" (ṣabr jamíl)<sup>34</sup> . . . The most exalted fruit of the tree of*

*detachment has always been and will ever be patience.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>35</sup>

With no definitive list of the tablets revealed to these women, it is impossible to know how many may have been mislaid over the century or so since their composition. The tablets themselves give us some clues, however. In a Tablet to Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih, Bahá’u’lláh says that she should try to grasp something of the power and majesty of the revealed word, and indicates that many tablets have already been revealed in her honour:

*Praise be to God, that leaf has repeatedly received divine verses and has quaffed the sealed wine (raḥíq-i makhtúm) from the hands of God’s bounty, the Self-Subsistent. This favour cannot be equalled by any other material thing (shayy) . . . Previously you have received writings from the Exalted Pen. This station is most great; treasure it.*<sup>36</sup>

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>37</sup>

This sentiment is echoed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who suggests Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih was the recipient of many tablets during the lifetime of Bahá’u’lláh:

*... In the days of the Manifestation (zuhúr) you received much bounty and numerous tablets (alváḥ-i muta‘addidih).*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>38</sup>

## On the importance of recognising

## the Manifestation of God

This is a recurrent theme which dominates many of these Tablets. In a tablet addressed to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá’u’lláh writes

*O My leaf! Upon you be My glory (bahá’). Praise be to God that in the days of God you have experienced the endless rains of mercy and have drunk from the cup of recognition (‘irfán).*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>39</sup>

In this Tablet addressed to Laqá’íyyih, Bahá’u’lláh appears to make reference to her allegiance to Him at a young age:

*O leaf! Blessed are you for, in the first days (avval-i ayyám) you have turned to face God. Today is a blessed day and for it no like or similar day has been decreed.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>40</sup>

In another Tablet to Laqá’íyyih, Bahá’u’lláh highlights the importance of recognising the manifestation of God during His earthly lifetime, and elevates the station of this young child above that of the world’s leaders:

*Praise be to God that in the days of the Blessed Tree, you have attained unto that which the learned men (‘ulamá’) and rulers (umará’) of the world have not, except those whom God has willed.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>41</sup>

In a Tablet to Laqá’íyyih’s younger sister, Huviyyih, Bahá’u’lláh suggests that this young child and her female relatives

(“the other leaves”) will guide the women of the world to the new religion:

*God willing that leaf and the other leaves will quaff from the cup of this revelation (bayán) which has appeared from the horizon of God's revelation and will lead the handmaidens of the earth to the plain of God's bounty.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>42</sup>

This powerful statement suggests that Bahá'u'lláh was of the opinion that the acceptance of the Bahá'í faith by women from socially prominent families in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iran (like that of Diyá'u'l-Hájíyyih which had familial ties to high government officials) could, in turn, lead to the conversion of other Qájár women and perhaps the wives and daughters of princes and ministers. Tehran's population in 1883 has been estimated at just above 100,000.<sup>43</sup> It is not unreasonable to believe, given the city's relatively small population, that a nucleus of committed, deepened Bahá'í women could, given the right climate, exert a great deal of influence on the educated women of the capital.

In a Tablet addressed to Rúḥá (Diyá'u'l-Hájíyyih's third daughter), 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the ease with which she has been able to recognise Bahá'u'lláh, because of her family's devotion to the Bahá'í religion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá underlines the responsibility the bounty of being born into a steadfast Bahá'í family carries:

*A hundred thousand maidservants,  
who for countless years engaged in*

*divers arduous devotions, and who, with fervent longing and tearful lamentation, supplicated the threshold of Divine Oneness that they may live but for a moment in these days and perceive the merest glimmer of the Sinaitic fire, expired at last in the wilderness of separation, and, with infinite regret, laid down their lives in love's arena. Thou, however, having neither expended effort or suffered hardship, nor experienced the fatigue of arduous devotions, hast, through purest grace and bounty, become a recipient of this bestowal from Him Who is the Lord of the seen and the unseen, attained unto the Days of God, and been favoured with a boundless outpouring of His mercy and loving-kindness.*

translated from Persian by  
the Research Department  
at the Bahá'í World Centre<sup>44</sup>

## References made to the women's royal heritage in the Tablets

Shahansháh Baygum, Ághá Sháhzádiḥ and Diyá'u'l-Hájíyyih, by virtue of their direct descent from Fath-'Alí Sháh via his seventh daughter, Diyá'u's-Saltāniḥ, were members of the Qájár nobility. Their allegiance to the Bahá'í religion no doubt diminished their influence at court, but they did have a number of close Muslim relatives who occupied positions of power. In addition to Intizámu's-Saltāniḥ's non-Bahá'í relatives and descendants (who have been discussed above), it should be noted that Shahansháh Baygum's nephew, 'Alí-Qulí

Khán, Musháviru’l-Mamálik, held a number of important political posts during his lifetime. He was appointed to the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs on several occasions between 1915 and 1926, tried in vain to represent Iran at the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles in 1919, and was Iran’s ambassador to Moscow from 1928-1931.<sup>45</sup> It was Musháviru’l-Mamálik whom Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájiyyih contacted to acquire the necessary travel documents for the pilgrimage to Haifa.<sup>46</sup> Another high-ranking Muslim relative of Shahansháh Baygum was her first cousin, Galín Khánum, Shamsu’l-Dawlih, daughter of Aḥmad-‘Alí Mírzá (one of Ḍiyá’us’-Salṭaniḥ’s full-brothers) who was the first wife of Náṣiru’d-Dín Sháh.<sup>47</sup>

As minor Qájár princesses, it is perhaps not surprising that we come across subtle references to royalty in Bahá’u’lláh’s and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablets to the women of Ibn-i Aṣḍaq’s family. This is not to say that tablets to other women who did not have connections to the royal court do not contain references to queens and the like, but the fact that Shahansháh Baygum and her daughters were of the aristocracy adds an added layer of meaning to these royal references when they appear in the Tablets revealed in their honour.

In one very intriguing Tablet, Bahá’u’lláh praises Ághá Sháhzádiḥ for having recognised Him and raises her station as a steadfast female believer above that of the queens of the world:

*By the grace of God, exalted be*

*His Glory, you have attained a station, which is the pride of the queens of the world. Every day in the name of God, the Queen of London goes to church, and in her mind (bih gamán-i khud) she is busy with the remembrance of God, but God has borne and does bear witness to her heedlessness (ghiflat), because she is deprived of knowing Him and clings to His name, just like the rest of the empresses of the world (sá’ir-i impirátúriḥ-há-yi ‘álam).*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>48</sup>

Since Ághá Sháhzádiḥ did not convert to the Bahá’í religion until the late 1870s, it is reasonable to assume that Bahá’u’lláh penned this Tablet after having sent His tablet to Queen Victoria (ca. 1868). It is known that Queen Victoria began to use the title “Empress of India” around 1877; Bahá’u’lláh’s reference to “the rest of the empresses of the world” would suggest that this Tablet was revealed some time after that. This Tablet may be useful to those who wish to understand Bahá’u’lláh’s reaction to Queen Victoria’s lukewarm response to His weighty Tablet.

Bahá’u’lláh again appears to refer to His addressee’s royal lineage in a Tablet to Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájiyyih:

*The queens of the world, night and day have turned towards the Lord of Eternity and have uttered the mention of the Greatest Name and when the horizon of the heaven of manifestation was illumined by the lights of God’s face, all were seen to be heedless . . .*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>49</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh exalts the station of those women who recognise Him above that of the temporal rulers of the world. Iran did not have a “queen” as such. The word used here is *malakih-há*, which suggests non-Iranian queens, and therefore it is more likely that Bahá'u'lláh means European royals, such as Queen Victoria.

In a Tablet addressed to Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the power of the word of God, seemingly alluding to the Tablets He has sent to the kings and rulers of the world:

*Ponder on the power of the exalted Word. It is continually in motion. In these days from every direction . . . its traces have headed for the leaders of the world so that all may become aware of that which they are veiled from in this day.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>50</sup>

Since the Tablets to the kings were sent between 1867-1869, and Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih did not become a Bahá'í until the end of the 1870s, perhaps Bahá'u'lláh is referring to subsequent tablets, or else speaking metaphorically.

In a Persian Tablet addressed to Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá alludes to her royal heritage in both subtle and poetic terms, suggesting that she has lost a temporal crown and gained a spiritual one:

*Thank God that He has chosen you from among the women of the*

*world and has exalted your head with the glittering crown of recognition (‘irfán). This diadem of the love of God is the pearl of the casket of bounty which has illuminated the eastern and western horizon. What more do you seek? What more do you want than this? Praise be to God that in servitude to the Ancient Beauty you have a neckband encrusted with gemstones of the Greatest Name around your neck and a golden earring of the Most Exalted in servitude to that manifest Spirit in your ear.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>51</sup>

Here ‘Abdu'l-Bahá describes Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih as a woman slave, with a neckband (*ṭawq*) and earring (*ḥalqih*), both characteristic indicators of slavehood. The intended message is, perhaps, that Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih should not take pride in her royal lineage, but rather in her obedience to the Centre of the Covenant.

There is a sense in many of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ and Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih that He appreciates the fact that, although they come from a wealthy background and are part of the Qájár ruling elite, they sacrificed (or at least risked) much of their material wealth and social status by aligning themselves with the Bahá'í movement. Their allegiance to the Bahá'í religion no doubt caused them financial hardship. Ághá Sháhzádiḥ seems to have been fairly wealthy (in part due to her marriage to Intizámu's-Salṭaniḥ). She and her husband provided a house for Ḍiyá'u'l-



Ḥájíyyih and Ibn-i Aşdaq in Tehran (near to Intizámu’s-Saltānih’s garden residence) and there are references in the tablets revealed in her honour that she helped the family financially. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá thanks Ághá Sháhzádiḥ for her efforts, saying:

*The consideration and love you have shown to the family of Ibn-i Ismu’lláh al-Aşdaq is beloved and mentioned before God.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>52</sup>

As mentioned above, Shahansháh Baygum appears to have owned her own house in the same district of Tehran in the late 1800s, but to have moved to live with Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih and her family by the early 1900s. Shahansháh Baygum also provided financial support to Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih’s family, perhaps by selling her personal possessions and jewellery.<sup>53</sup> Ibn-i Aşdaq was a full time Bahá’í teacher and administrator who earned a modest income, had no personal wealth to speak of and who was often on missions which took him far away from Tehran. His family did not live in luxury, which is apparent from Rúḥá’s description of their simple house, and from the fact that Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih and her daughters were accustomed to performing every-day household chores such as cooking and sewing clothes.<sup>54</sup> It was from limited savings set aside by Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih for her daughters that Huviyyih, Rúḥá and Ṭalí’ih were able to pay for their passage to Haifa.<sup>55</sup>

In a Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, perhaps referring to financial problems,

Bahá’u’lláh consoles her, saying:

*By My life and by the Cause of God, the treasures of the world do not equal this Tablet, nor does that which the kings and sovereigns of the world possess.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>56</sup>

In another Tablet, perhaps revealed in response to a letter detailing the family’s difficulties, financial or otherwise, Bahá’u’lláh again alludes to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ’s royal lineage, saying:

*O My leaf! O My handmaiden! Upon you be My glory (bahá’) . . . All the women of the world, queens, princesses and others have sacrificed much material wealth in order to hear the words, “O My handmaiden!”, and in this time of the divine manifestation and the appearance of the breaths of divine revelation all have been deprived, except a few. Give thanks to the Desire of the peoples of the world that you have attained this most great bounty and most exalted station. What is now vital and necessary is the preservation of this station.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>57</sup>

In a Tablet to Ḍiyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih, Bahá’u’lláh says that it is her relationship to God that is important today, not her connection to any worldly wealth or familial bond:

*Today being related to God (nisbatu’lláh) is acceptable and desired . . . This relationship is the king of relationships and this station is the sovereign of all stations*

*. . . Blessed is the soul whom outward connections (nisbat-i zāhiriḥ) and material possessions (asbāb-i fāniyyih) have not prevented from being connected to God . . . One word from Him is better than the wealth of the whole world.*

provisional translation  
from Persian?<sup>58</sup>

The risks involved for women who gave their allegiance to the Bahá'í Faith in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iran should not be underestimated. Ághá Sháhzádiḥ's husband was himself a Bahá'í (although he might have kept this quiet at court), as was Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih's husband, Ibn-i Aşdaq. Shahansháh Baygum, however, secretly converted some time around her marriage to her second husband, who was a Muslim. It is likely, given the circumstances, that Shahansháh Baygum kept her Bahá'í identity from her husband, at least at the outset, and perhaps until his death.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to exalting early Bahá'í women above the queens and empresses of His day, more controversially, Bahá'u'lláh raises them to a level higher than that of the clergy of the time. In a Tablet to Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih He writes:

*Praise be to the Desire of the world that He has assisted you to turn towards and recognise the Horizon of His revelation and the Dawning-Place of His cause at a time when the clergy ('ulamá')<sup>60</sup> of the world and its rulers (umará') have been seen to be prevented [from doing so] and veiled [therefrom]. Throughout the centuries and ages they have asked God –*

*exalted be His glory – to see this day, and when the horizon of the heaven of manifestation was illumined by the One who spoke on Sinai, they acted in such a way that the eyes of grandeur wept and the trees of the Exalted Paradise began to groan. He did not deprive you of His grace, and He has guided you to the Straight Path.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>61</sup>

### References in the Tablets to women and their role in the Bahá'í community

With the declaration of Ághá Sháhzádiḥ in the late 1870s and the subsequent conversion of her mother and her younger sister, and the birth of Laqá'iyyih (Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih's first daughter) in 1886, by the mid 1880s, three generations of women in this branch of the Qájár clan were Bahá'ís. This fact is reflected in a number of the tablets revealed in their honour. In an Arabic prayer revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for Ághá Sháhzádiḥ we read:

*O my Lord! I am Your handmaiden and the daughter of Your handmaiden. In Your verses you have made me one of the leaves of the Blessed Tree.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, in a Tablet to Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*I am Your handmaiden and the daughter of Your handmaiden. Your Call has awakened me and*

*Your Verses have attracted me.*  
provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>63</sup>

In a Tablet addressed to Qiyá'u'l-Hájiyyih's second daughter, Huviyyih (b. ca. 1888), who represented the third generation of Bahá'í women on her mother's side, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*O my Lord! I am Your handmaiden  
and the daughter of Your hand-  
maiden.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>64</sup>

In Their tablets to women, Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá often draw comparisons between the faithful devotion of their female followers and the heedlessness of the generality of the men of the age. In such tablets, women believers are said to have surpassed men. In a Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*How many are those men (rijál)  
who, after waiting, did not attain  
the most exalted horizon and how  
many are the women (imá') who,  
in the name of Abhá, have quaffed  
from the goblet of recognition  
(‘irfán).<sup>65</sup>*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>66</sup>

This suggests that the number of women who independently recognised Bahá'u'lláh (rather than through their husbands, fathers or other male relatives) was fairly high. The term Bahá'u'lláh often uses to refer to the prominent or influential men of the age is “rijál”, an Arabic word which literally means “men”, but which often (though not always) conveys the idea of “prominent

men” or “leading men” when used by Bahá'u'lláh, whether in Persian or in Arabic.<sup>67</sup> In an Arabic Tablet addressed to Qiyá'u'l-Hájiyyih, Bahá'u'lláh says:

*Blessed are you that you have  
heard and turned towards God  
when the majority of men (rijál)  
have turned away from Him. By  
the Lord of the worlds, this suf-  
fices you. In truth He loves his  
handmaidens and servants who  
make mention of Him.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>68</sup>

And in another, Persian, Tablet to Qiyá'u'l-Hájiyyih, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*By the grace of God, exalted be  
His glory, you have attained that  
which the majority of the men of  
the world (rijál-i ard) are ignorant  
of.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh addresses Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, saying:

*A remembrance from Us be upon  
she who has turned towards the  
Face of God and sought to  
advance towards the Most Great  
Ocean when the majority of men  
(rijál) have turned away from  
Him.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>70</sup>

As regards the role women should play in the Bahá'í community of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá encourage Ibn-i Aṣḍaq's female relatives to be active members of the community. In an Arabic prayer revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for

Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih we read:

*Assist me and Your maidservants  
in Your remembrance and praise  
and in arising to serve Your  
Cause.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>71</sup>

As mentioned above, female Bahá'ís were the primary teachers of non-Bahá'í women during the early years of the growth of the religion in Iran. From reading the tablets revealed in honour of the women of Ibn-i Aṣḍaq's household, it seems clear that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá believed Bahá'í women could best attract other women to their religion through upright conduct and stainless chastity. In a Tablet to Ḍiyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*We ask God to adorn His maidser-  
vants with the ornament of chasti-  
ty ('iṣmat) and illumine them with  
the light of knowledge (ma'rifat).*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>72</sup>

In a society where women had little (if any) semblance of a public role, and where they were not encouraged to express themselves verbally, it is not surprising that 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid great emphasis on morality and teaching by example. In a Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*Today, when one of the leaves of  
the Blessed Tree becomes steadfast  
in the Covenant, she will reach the  
highest branches of the Sinai Tree  
. . . And when, through the power  
of piety and the light of guidance,  
she rises up to serve the Cause of  
God and to exalt the Word of*

*God, she will shine brightly like a  
luminous star over the horizon of  
the world. The bounty of these  
days is great, most great and the  
mercies of the merciful Lord are  
glorious, most glorious. One good  
deed and one action for the sake  
of God in this day is equal to one  
hundred thousand good works and  
righteous deeds, and one breath in  
this day is equal to one hundred  
thousand years of pious worship .  
. . So thank your Lord the All-  
Glorious that your services have  
been recorded by the shining pen  
in God's court (ḏíván) and at the  
threshold (ayván) of the All-  
Merciful your ample reward is  
decreed.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>73</sup>

In a further Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly spells out the mission of the Iranian Bahá'í women of His day, both within and without the Bahá'í community:

*O confirmed leaf! The time has  
come to set aflame the world with  
the heat of the love of God and,  
through the lights of holiness and  
purity, to transform the earth into  
a paradise of oneness (tawḥíd).  
The maidservants of the All-  
Merciful today must be sent out  
like birds of holiness and night  
and day strive for the sanctifica-  
tion and purification of the other  
souls so that all the maidservants  
of the All-Merciful may gather  
like angels of purity.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>74</sup>

Female Bahá'ís could easily convey the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to other women

of their social class in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, but in a Tablet to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá'u'lláh suggests the actions of his female followers could lead to the awakening of the generality of mankind:

*O maidservants of God! Today is the day of remembrance and praise and the day of pure deeds. Strive that perhaps there may appear from you that which will cause those who have turned away to draw near and awaken those who are asleep.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>75</sup>

In a similar Tablet to Diyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encourages her with these words:

*This Servant . . . is ever waiting for that maidservant of the Abhá Beauty to kindle such a flame among the maidservants of the All-Merciful that she may become a centre of the heat of God's love. The favour of God in respect to you is great, most great . . .*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>76</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá is encouraging Diyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih to become a catalyst for change among the Bahá'í women of Tehran, whose numbers cannot have exceeded a few thousand at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In a segregated community, the influence of Bahá'í women was generally limited to that which they could exert on their female coreligionists, as Bahá'í women's gatherings and activities would have normally been closed to men. In a tablet addressed to Laqá'íyyih, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Make me at all times to call out Your praise among Your maidservants.*

provisional translation  
from Arabic<sup>77</sup>

Some time in 1914, following their pilgrimage, Huviyyih, Rúḥá and Ṭalí'ih sent some photographs to 'Abdu'l-Bahá of themselves which had been taken whilst in the Holy Land. In response, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote this Tablet in which He encourages these young women to actively promote their religion:

*The photographs ye sent of yourselves have been received and seen. Praise be to God that the light of faith is clearly shining in your faces. It is my hope that ye may attain the most great spirituality; that the fount of knowledge may well up in your breasts; that your tongues may speak out in praise of our gracious and beloved Lord . . . And that, by day and night, ye may have no thought or concern save to set forth His proofs and testimonies, and to become enkindled in your love for the Almighty.*

translated from Persian by  
the Research Department at  
the Bahá'í World Centre<sup>78</sup>

Service to the Bahá'í community through upright, moral behaviour implied strict observance of Bahá'í laws; after recognition comes action. In a Tablet to Diyá'u'l-Ḥájíyyih, Bahá'u'lláh says:

*We send greetings to the maidservants of God and counsel you all to follow that which God has sent down in the Book.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>79</sup>

In a further Tablet to Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*We send greetings to the maidser-  
vants of that land and counsel  
them to do that which befits the  
days of God. Blessed is the soul  
who has heard and acted in accor-  
dance with the counsels of the  
Most Exalted Pen.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>80</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's references to "the Book" (*kitáb*) and "the counsels of the Most Exalted Pen" most probably refer to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, which was completed around 1873. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was first published in Bombay in 1890-1 and printed copies may well have reached Iran before Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892.

It should not be forgotten that there remained many practical restrictions on women and their freedoms (or lack thereof) in Iran at the time. It was almost impossible for women (whether Bahá'í or otherwise) to travel without the permission or, at the very least, the support of their male relatives. Many women of the royal court and those from wealthy families did make pilgrimages to Mashhad, Najaf, Karbalá and even Mecca, but these journeys were expensive, time-consuming and fraught with danger.<sup>81</sup> Pilgrimage to the Haifa and 'Akká area was not impossible for Bahá'í women, but it was not that common (especially during the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh), although some women did manage to make this difficult journey.

It seems that Ághá Sháhzádiḥ longed to visit Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká, although for some reason this does not seem to have happened. In a Tablet addressed to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Your letter has reached this  
Wronged One in the Most Great  
Prison and the fragrance of love  
and longing is spreading from it.  
Be patient in separation! Verily He  
will destine for you the reward of  
reunion and assist you through  
His grace, and decree for you what  
will perpetuate your mention  
throughout the Kingdom of God,  
the Mighty, the Wise.*

provisional translation  
from Persian and Arabic<sup>82</sup>

It is unclear why Ághá Sháhzádiḥ was unable to make the pilgrimage to 'Akká. Perhaps the journey was too politically sensitive, given her family connections to the royal family and her husband's government employment. No doubt it was important not to jeopardise the court connections of the family, which were vital for Ibn-i Aşdaq if he was to teach prominent people and deliver tablets addressed to courtiers by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise on politics, the *Risálih-yi Siyásiyyih* (1892-3), which he delivered to the court. Although Ághá Sháhzádiḥ does not seem to have travelled to the Holy Land, in at least one tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the women of the Holy Family have visited the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in her name. As a post script to a Tablet addressed to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*On the Birthday of Bahá'u'lláh*

*(yawm-i mawlúd), a feast was given in the name of that handmaiden of God and all the women of the Holy Household (ḥaram), in her stead, made pilgrimage to the Most Holy Shrine.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>83</sup>

Similarly to Diyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

*When visiting the Shrine, the Concourse on High made pilgrimage in your place and in that of all your relatives and similarly, in proxy, a feast was given in the name of those leaves and all was accepted (maqbul).<sup>84</sup>*

provisional translation  
from Persian

In another Tablet to Diyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih, written some time before or after her pilgrimage to Haifa in 1913-1914, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reassures her, saying:

*O handmaiden of God and daughter of His handmaiden and sister of His handmaiden! Rest assured that at all times in this presence you are mentioned and that you are present in this assemblage. For, if in body you are far away, in spirit you are close by; you are prevented from seeing [us], but you have attained insight (baṣírat). Physically you are distant, but spiritually you are near, and at the Holy Threshold remembrance of you is on the tongues and in the hearts of the maidservants of the All-Merciful.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>85</sup>

The conversion of Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, Diyá’u’l-Ḥájíyyih and their mother to the

Bahá’í faith seems to have been more faith-motivated than to do with women’s rights or any other social issue. Given their court connections and social status, it is highly likely that these women held conservative views on religious and moral matters. Their conversion to the Bahá’í religion at a time when the faith’s adherents were openly persecuted by the Qájár state was, in itself, however, a radical and courageous step, especially when we consider that Shahansháh Baygum’s husband was both Muslim and an employee of the government.<sup>86</sup>

Of the two Tablets revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in honour of Shahansháh Baygum that I have located, one is an Arabic tablet of visitation revealed after her passing (around 1919) and the other is a short Persian tablet in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises Shahansháh Baygum for recognising Bahá’u’lláh and aligning herself with the Bahá’í religion, when so many have turned away in rejection of His call:

*O handmaiden of God! When the effulgence of the light reached the pinnacle of Sinai, the eyes of those in the graves did not perceive the light . . . So give thanks that you are of those few [who did] and that you are clinging fast to the Blessed Beauty and that in both the unseen and seen worlds you are looked upon by the glance of favour and a manifestation of favours and mercy.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps the most outstanding tablet to the women of Ibn-i Aṣdaq’s family as a

whole was penned in their honour by 'Abdu'l-Bahá after He had been informed of the instrumental role they played in establishing the first Bahá'í study classes for women in how to teach the Bahá'í religion. This Tablet was most likely revealed some time after they returned from Haifa in 1914. It does not mention Ághá Sháhzádh, who passed away some time before 1913. This Tablet was sent via Ibn-i Aşdaq and, in addition to naming Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih and her four daughters, it is addressed to sixteen other Bahá'í women of Tehran, including one of Ibn-i Aşdaq's sisters, surnamed "Ukht-i Shahíd" ("sister of the martyr").<sup>88</sup> Below is an extract from the Tablet:

*O you handmaidens who are attracted to the divine fragrances! Until now no study class on teaching the Cause (dars-i tabligh) had been established among the handmaidens of the All-Merciful. Now, through the bounties of the All-Glorious Beauty, in Tehran, the handmaidens of the All-Merciful have succeeded in establishing such a class . . . It is hoped that in a short space of time those beloved maidservants of God will become so skilled in using rational proofs (dalá'il-i ma'qúlih) that each one of them will talk with decisive proofs, clear explanations, luminous reasoning, eloquent speech and fluent words before the learned ('ulamá) of the world. If this assemblage succeeds as it must and should, and if makes progress and if the members memorise the annals (akhbár), Qur'anic verses and Hadíth that point to the dawning of the Sun of Truth . . . Confirmations from the kingdom of God will assuredly be*

*received, enabling some radiant leaves to appear resplendent in the assemblage of this world with clear proofs and convincing reasons, which will adorn the case of womanhood. They will prove in this cycle women are equal to men, nay in certain respects they will excel . . . In this wonderful Cause numerous were the men who scaled the heights of knowledge; they had a brilliant utterance, a convincing proof, an eloquent tongue and magnificent speech, but the blessed leaf, Jináb-i Táhiri, because she was a woman, emerged with immense splendour and dumbfounded all the people. If she were a man, this would not have been so at all . . . If one of the leaves is attracted and gains mastery in demonstrating reasons and proofs and in uttering convincing evidences, she will shine resplendently . . . If you work actively in this realm, the outpourings of the Blessed Beauty will reflect as the sun in the mirrors of the hearts. Your progress will astonish all. The attracted leaves should not, when associating with each other, talk merely about the temperature of the weather, the coldness of the water, the beauty of the flowers and gardens, the freshness of the grass and the flowing water. They should rather restrict their discussions to glorification and praise and the uttering of proofs and reasons, to quoting verses and traditions and putting forth clear testimonies, so that all the homes of the loved ones will be converted into gathering places for lessons on teaching the Cause.*

provisional translation  
from Persian<sup>89</sup>



## Notes

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1. A selection of these tablets was sent to me by the Universal House of Justice. Additional tablets can be found in numbers 26 and 16 of the Iranian National Bahá'í Archives Manuscript Collection [INBA] volumes. All translations in this article are my own, unless stated otherwise.

2. Ibn-i Aşdaq and his father were most likely imprisoned in the prison known as Habs-i Anbár.

3. In the tablets addressed to the women of Ibn-i Aşdaq's family there are frequent references to him as a Hand of the Cause of God. In an Arabic Tablet written by Bahá'u'lláh to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ we read:

*Blessings and peace be upon the Hands of His Cause who have taken hold of the Book through His power and made His Cause victorious among His servants. We ask God to assist them under all conditions to be so steadfast as to cause the hearts of the heedless to tremble.*

provisional translation from  
Arabic; UHJ Selection

In a Tablet written to Ḍiyá'u'l-Hájjiyyih, 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists some of Ibn-i Aşdaq's most recent travels:

*Praise be to God, he is a servant of the Cause and, arising in service, he hastened to India and raised up the flag of the mention of God and in that region (iq lím) he caused a commotion. Then he was sent on a mission to the Caucasus and 'Ishqábád and, God willing, those services will also be accomplished. Among other things, in Marv, he facilitated the establishment of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and he sent a plan to the Holy Land (arḍ-i maqṣúd). Now in that city he is supervising an inn for travellers and a school (maktab) so that the Bahá'í children will receive divine education and the glorious government of Russia has donated a plot of land for free on which to build the temple and, with the permission of the Emperor, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár will be built . . . In brief, you must consider that his Holiness the Martyr (ḥaḍrat-i shahíd) is busy with praiseworthy services . . . Now, in order to facilitate some of the affairs of that land, he has been ordered*

*to Tehran. Soon he will light up the house and nest of that dear handmaiden.*

provisional translation  
from Persian; INBA 16

4. For more biographical information on Ibn-i Aşdaq, see 'Abdu'l-'Alí 'Ala'í, *Mu'assasiḥ-yi Ayádí-yi Amr'ulláh*, Tehran (1974), pp. 465-493; Hasan Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís in the time of Bahá'u'lláh*, Oxford (1985), pp. 171-176; Kázim Samandar, *Tárikh-i Samandar va mulḥaqqát*, Tehran (1975), pp.163-171. For more information on Mullá Šádiq, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tadhkiratu'l-Vafá*, Langenhain (2002), pp. 5-8; Abú'l-Qásim Afnán, *'Ahd-i A'lá: Zindagání-yi Haḍrat-i Báḅ*, Oxford (2001), pp. 84, 123-129 and 379; Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: the making of the Babi movement in Iran, 1844-1850*, Ithaca (1989), pp. 136-138, 146, 151, 260-264 and 286-289; Hasan Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís in the time of Bahá'u'lláh*, Oxford (1985), pp.7-23; 'Aziz'ulláh Sulaymání, *Maṣábiḥ-i Hidáyat*, vol. VII, Tehran (1973), pp 374-418.

5. Mírzá Mas'úd Anšarí Garmrúdí (1790-1848) was first appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs by Muḥammad Sháh in 1835, a position he held until 1838, and once again from 1845-1848. Mírzá Mas'úd was the first Iranian official to master French, a distinction which gained him entry into the entourage of 'Abbas Mírzá. Mírzá Mas'úd was an important member of the delegation headed by Khusraw Mírzá which was sent to the Russian court at St. Petersburg after the murder of the Russian Ambassador, Alexander Griboyedov in Tehran in 1829. In 1835 Mírzá Mas'úd married Fath-'Alí Shah's seventh daughter, Shah Baygum, Ḍiyá'u's-Saḷṭaniḥ (1799-1873). Ḍiyá'u's-Saḷṭaniḥ acted as private secretary to Fath-'Alí Shah and was the Munshíu'l-Mamálik (official secretary) of the royal *andarúni* or harem. Ḍiyá'u's-Saḷṭaniḥ was an accomplished poet and an excellent calligrapher. Other descendants of Fath-'Alí Shah who converted to the Bábi-Bahá'í religion include, Abú'l-Hasan Mírzá, Shaykhu'l-Ra'ís, son of Fath-'Alí Sháh's seventh son, Muḥammad-Taquí Mírzá; Shams-i Jahán Khánum, "Fitniḥ", daughter of Fath-'Alí Sháh's thirteenth son, Muḥammad-Riḍá Mírzá; and Badr-i Jahán Khánum, Fath-'Alí Sháh's forty-eighth daughter who became a Bábi through Ṭáhirih in Kirmanshah.

6. Sayyid Abdullah, Intizámu's-Saltānih himself received tablets from Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. He may well have kept his allegiance to the Bahá'í religion a secret at court, since shortly before his death he was appointed Chief of Police for Tehran. Intizámu's-Saltānih's father Mírzá Músá Vazír, was appointed Minister of Tehran by Náṣiru'd-Dín Sháh, a position conferred on his elder son, Mírzá 'Isá, after him. Mírzá Músá had been present at the interrogation of the Báb presided over by the crown prince, Náṣiru'd-Dín Mírzá, at Tabriz in July 1848. Ághá Sháhzádiḥ and Intizámu's-Saltānih had one son, Sayyid Muḥammad, who was given his father's title after his death and who was a Bahá'í (see Maḥmúd Zarqání, *Badáyi'u'l-Athár*, vol.II, Langenhain). Sayyid Muḥammad married Khurshíd-Laqa Ghaffárí and two of their sons, 'Abdu'lláh and Naṣr'u'lláh Intizám, rose high in the service of the Pahlaví state.
7. According to Parvin Namdar (eldest granddaughter of Laqa'iyyih) soon after her husband's secret conversion, Ághá Sháhzádiḥ became worried that he was attending clandestine meetings. When she confronted him about the matter, he did not tell her he had become a Bahá'í, perhaps because of his high social standing and government employment. Some time after this confrontation Ághá Sháhzádiḥ had a dream in which she saw the phrase, "*Haqq záhir shud*" ("God has become manifested") written in the sky. When she related this dream to her husband, he finally told her of his conversion and she soon declared. Within a relatively short space of time she converted her mother, Shahansháh Baygum, and her younger sister, 'Udhra' Khánum, to the new faith. Ághá Sháhzádiḥ's middle sister, Khánum Sháhzádiḥ, who married a relative, Mírzá Isháq Khán Mas'úd Anṣarí, did not become Bahá'í.
8. It is unclear when or for what reason Bahá'u'lláh gave Ághá Sháhzádiḥ this name, but it appears at the top of several of the tablets revealed in her honour. It may be concluded that tablets revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for Ághá Sháhzádiḥ which do not name her as Badí'ih predate those which do carry her new conversion name.
9. Ághá Sháhzádiḥ's mother, Shahansháh Baygum, was known as "Ághá Jan" to her close relatives and in her later years, Ibn-i Aṣdaq's eldest daughter, Laqa'iyyih, was called "Ághám" by her children and grandchildren. In at least one of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets to Ághá Sháhzádiḥ, He addresses her as "Jináb-i Áqá Sháhzádiḥ" using the male title "Jináb" ("sir") which is occasionally used to refer to outstanding early Bábí-Bahá'í women such as Ṭáhirih, Qurratu'l-'Ayn.
10. According to Parvin Namdar, Shahansháh Baygum and Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih were taunted by some of the other women in their party who knew of their allegiance to the Bahá'í faith and their desire to make a pilgrimage to 'Akká.
11. This may be the house labelled, "House of the daughter of Diyá'u's-Saltānih", which appears on the 1892 map of Tehran drawn up by Najmu'd-Dawlih.
12. According to Parvin Namdar, after returning to Iran, Huviyyih related that when the daughters of Ibn-i Aṣdaq entered the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá he said, "*Laqa'iyyih musharraf shud*" ("Laqa'iyyih has already made her pilgrimage").
13. The definitive list of the tablets revealed to the women of Ibn-i Aṣdaq's household has yet to be compiled. It is also important to note that Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih may well have been addressed at the end of those tablets revealed to her husband, Ibn-i Aṣdaq. The number of tablets revealed to Ibn-i Aṣdaq and his father, Mullá Šádiq, are thought to number in the hundreds and have yet to be published as a collection. When they are, additional sections addressed to the women of the family may well come to light. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá also revealed a number of tablets to Ibn-i Aṣdaq's mother, Bibí Ján (Mullá Šádiq Khurásání first wife) and to Mullá Šádiq's second wife and his three daughters, Ibn-i Aṣdaq's sisters.
14. In tablets addressed to both Ághá Sháhzádiḥ and Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih, Bahá'u'lláh quotes from the Qur'án and expounds on the meaning of particular verses, thereby suggesting that they were familiar with Islamic texts and doctrines.
15. Rúḥá Aṣdaq, *Yik 'Umr, Yik Khátirih* (1987), p. 7. Shahansháh Baygum also read Persian poetry with her granddaughters, who also studied Esperanto and English (see *ibid.*, p. 8). See also *Yarán-i Pársi*, p. 477 for a tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a certain Fariburz who taught English to these young women. When Dr. Sarah Clock arrived in Tehran assist the city's Bahá'í women, she chose Rúḥá to be her interpreter (*ibid.*, p. 8). Ibn-i Aṣdaq's daughters supported the education of

- women, and his eldest granddaughter, ʿĀl'at Mudabbir (Khalílí-Qazvíní), was among the first graduates from the Tarbiyat school for girls, which opened in Tehran in 1910.
16. See Rúhā Aşdaq, *Yik 'Umr, Yik Kháţirih*, p. 21.
  17. Tablets with a more general content may well have been circulated for other members of the family or the wider community (including men) to read. Those tablets (or sections thereof) with a more personal message, or those tablets in which specific questions addressed by the recipients to Bahá'u'lláh or Abdu'l-Bahá had been answered, may have been considered private correspondence and therefore would have most likely not have been circulated to those outside the recipients immediate family. It should be noted, however, that, even as late as 1925, literacy among women in Iran has been estimated to have been as low as 3%. See Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: mutiny, appeasement and repression from 1900 to Khomeini*, New York (1982).
  18. From UHJ selection.
  19. From UHJ selection.
  20. Rúhā and Talí'ih were born after 1892 and so did not receive tablets from Bahá'u'lláh. The revelation of tablets in honour of children was not unheard of. When Ibn-i Aşdaq visited Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad aged 10-11 years, Bahá'u'lláh revealed a tablet in his honour.
  21. *Áyát-i Iláhí*, vol. II, Langenhain (1996), pp. 43, 44, 52, 65, 152, 187, 238, 252, 261, 264, 266, 335, 358 and 363.
  22. *Yárán-i Pársí*, Langenhain (1998), pp. 167, 373, 375, 381, 384 and 391.
  23. *Áyát-i Bayyinát*, Dundas, Ontario, (1999), pp. 109, 110, 128, 129, 133, 379, 397, 398, 399, 400, 414, 436, 437, 438, 450 and 451.
  24. *Women; Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice*, Wilmette (1997), pp. 2-7, 19-20, 26-27, 36-37 and 46-51.
  25. Rúhā Aşdaq, *Yik 'Umr, Yik Kháţirih*, p.36: Bahiyyih Khánum says to Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih, "I wish you had undertaken this trip at the time of Ághá Sháhzádi."
    26. From UHJ selection.
    27. From UHJ selection.
    28. From INBA 26.
    29. In one of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets to Ághá Sháhzádi He mentions that her petition (*'arídi*) has been received and her requests have been put to Bahá'u'lláh by Rúh'ulláh Varqá.
    30. From INBA.
    31. From UHJ selection.
    32. Here, Bahá'u'lláh is alluding to the story of Joseph's cloak which restores Jacob's sight, Qur'án 12:91-96.
    33. From INBA 26.
    34. This is a reference to the story of Joseph, Qur'án 12:18 and 12:83.
    35. From UHJ selection.
    36. This would suggest that Bahá'u'lláh may have revealed more than five tablets for Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih. There might also exist, within the tablets addressed to Ibn-i Aşdaq by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, sections revealed for Diyá'u'l-Hájiyyih which could be considered equivalent to independent tablets.
    37. From UHJ selection.
    38. From INBA 16.
    39. From UHJ selection.
    40. From INBA 26.
    41. From INBA 26.
    42. From INBA 26.
    43. See the entry on Tehran in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.
    44. Quoted in the preface to Rúhā Aşdaq, *One Life, One Memory*, Oxford (1999).
    45. Ironically, as Musháviru'l-Mamálik was attempting to get Iran represented fully at Versailles, Ibn-i Aşdaq (his first cousin's husband) had arrived in Holland to deliver 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to the Hague. See Jelle de Vries, *The Babi Question You Mentioned: the Origins of the Baha'i Community of the Netherlands, 1844-1962*, Leuven (2002), pp. 106-108, 11, 118, 119, 132, 178, 240, 271, 296 and 301.
    46. Rúhā Aşdaq, *Yik 'Umr Yik Kháţirih*, p. 21.
    47. See Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Náşiru'd-Dín Sháh Qájár and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, London (1997) pp. 48-49 and 78.
    48. From UHJ selection.
    49. From INBA 26.
    50. From UHJ selection.
    51. From INBA 16.
    52. From UHJ selection.
    53. Rúhā Aşdaq, *Yik 'Umr, Yik Kháţirih*, p. 19.
    54. Ibid., pp. 20, 37-38 and 50.
    55. Ibid., pp. 18-19. Rúhā (ibid., p. 54)

- writes that Shahansháh Baygum sent a ring for Bahiyyih Khánum, which Bahiyyih Khánum refused to give to 'Abdu'l-Bahá who wanted to present it to one of the believers.
56. From UHJ selection.
  57. From UHJ selection.
  58. From UHJ selection.
  59. It is unclear how much Shahansháh Baygum's middle daughter, Khánum Sháhzádiḥ, was attracted to the Baha'i teachings. Her husband was a Muslim, which would have made open allegiance to the new religion almost impossible. I am not aware of any tablets addressed to Khánum Sháhzádiḥ, but, from reading *Yik 'Umr, Yik Khátirih*, it is clear that Khánum Sháhzádiḥ maintained close ties with her Baha'i relatives. After her second husband's death, Shahansháh Baygum appears to have moved back to Tehran. When it is decided that Shahansháh Baygum is too frail to join the rest of the family to go on pilgrimage to Haifa in 1913, she moves temporarily to Khánum Sháhzádiḥ's home.
  60. The word '*ulamá*' (lit. "the learned"), in Persian normally refers to Muslim clerics.
  61. From INBA 26.
  62. From UHJ selection.
  63. From INBA 26.
  64. From INBA 26. Ibn-i Aşdaq's daughters were also third generation Bahá'is on their father's side, through their paternal grandmother, Bibí Ján, and their paternal grandfather, Mullá Şádiq Khurásání.
  65. In this context, *rijál* seems to refer to men per se, rather than prominent or influential men in particular.
  66. From INBA 26.
  67. It could be argued that, in certain instances, prominent women may be counted among the *rijál* of an era.
  68. From INBA 26.
  69. From INBA 26.
  70. From INBA 26.
  71. From INBA 26.
  72. From INBA 26.
  73. From UHJ selection.
  74. From family archives.
  75. From INBA 26.
  76. From INBA 16.
  77. From INBA 26.
  78. Quoted in the preface to Rúḥá Aşdaq's *Yik 'Umr, Yik Khátirih*.
  79. From UHJ selection.
  80. From INBA 26.
  81. Diyá'u's-Saltaniḥ (Shahansháh Baygum's mother) performed the Hajj after her husband's death in 1865, as did Shahansháh Baygum and Diyá'ul-Ḥájjiyyih around the time of their conversion to the Baha'i religion.
  82. From INBA 26.
  83. From UHJ selection.
  84. From INBA 16.
  85. From INBA 16.
  86. Not enough is known about Muntakhabu'd-Dawlih to know whether he knew of Shahansháh Baygum's conversion, what he thought of it, or whether he knew Ibn-i Aşdaq visited his wife and stepdaughter to deepen them in Baha'i doctrines.
  87. From UHJ selection. In all likelihood Shahansháh Baygum also received tablets from Bahá'u'lláh, although, as of yet, I have been unable to locate these. Shahansháh Baygum is also mentioned in a number of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablets to Diyá'ul-Ḥájjiyyih and is addressed in at least three other tablets written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the women of Ibn-i Aşdaq's family.
  88. Since the tablet does not mention Shahansháh Baygum, it is most probable that it was revealed either after her passing in 1918-19, or else when she was too infirm to attend these classes.
  89. See the compilation on women, pp.48-49 for an English translation of a section from this Tablet.



# Textual Resurrection

## Book, Imám, and Cosmos in the Qur'án Commentaries of the Báb

Vahid Brown

### Abstract

The Báb was a strong reader — some would say a strange reader — of the canonical texts of Islam. The bulk of His earliest writings were in the form of commentaries on these texts. In what follows, I will discuss the radical notions of textuality underlying the Báb's Qur'anic commentaries. Drawing upon categories from contemporary literary studies, I will first provide a framework for my discussion of textuality. I will then discuss the history of Qur'anic commentary in Islam in light of these categories, focusing on elements in Akhbári Shí'í religious thought that can be seen to underpin the Báb's novel approach to the Qur'anic text. Far from being traditional commentaries, I will argue, the Báb's readings of the Qur'án were messianic performances, enunciations of an eschatological restoration of the Imám, the cosmos, and of the Qur'án itself.

I can give no better introduction to the unusual character of the Báb's Qur'anic commentaries than a brief example of His reading in action. Here then, are three passages: the first is the Súrat al-'Aşr from the Qur'án; the second is an abridgement of a classical Sunni commentary on this súra, by Ibn Kathír; the third is a brief selection from the Báb's lengthy commentary on this súra.

### 1) The Súrat al-'Aşr, Qur'án 103 (Rodwell trans.)

*In the Name of God, the  
Compassionate, the Merciful*

1] *I swear by the declining day!*

2] *Verily, man's lot is cast amid*

*destruction,*

3] *Save those who believe and do  
the things which are right, and  
enjoin truth and enjoin steadfast-  
ness on each other.*

### 2) From Ibn Kathír's Commentary

Verse 1: That is, the ages during which the deeds — both good and bad — of the sons of Adam take place. Malik said that it refers to the time of 'aşr prayer, but the first explanation is more correct.

Verse 2: God swears by it (time) that mankind is in loss, that is misfortune and ruin.

Verse 3: God excludes those of mankind who believe sincerely with all their hearts and do good deeds with their

hands. That is, in the face of misfortune or calamity, the things which have been decreed for us and the persecution by those who would seek to harm whoever orders the good and forbids the evil.

According to al-Ṭabarání, whenever any two Companions of the Prophet met, they would not part, until one of them had recited to the other Súrat Al-‘Aṣr and then delivered salutations upon him. Al-Sháfi‘í said: “If the people were to ponder on this Súrah, it would be sufficient for them.”<sup>1</sup>

### 3) From the Báḅ’s Tafsír wa’l-‘aṣr (min Súrat al-‘Aṣr)

(These are commentaries on each of the three Arabic letters in the word ‘aṣr, (meaning “time,” “age,” “afternoon,” or “declining day”), which are ‘ayn, ṣad, and rá, respectively. These are the fourth, fifth, and sixth letters of the first verse.)

*Then the fourth letter is ‘ayn, [1] the loftiness [‘uluw] of God’s Exclusive Unity [al-aḥadiyya] in the station of the Realm of Divinity [láhút]; [2] then the loftiness of Inclusive Unity [al-wáḥidiyya] in the states of the Empyrean of Power [jabarút]; [3] then the loftiness of Existential Mercy [raḥmáníyya] in the stations of the Kingdom and its Estates [mulk wa’l-malakút]; [4] then the loftiness of Eternal Glory [ṣamadáníyya] in what God hath self-manifested unto all, in all, in the realities of the souls and horizons, of the earth of the Realm of Humanity [násút].*

*Then the fifth letter is ṣad, [1] the*

*stations of the theophanic Eternal Glory [ṣamadáníyya] in the essential inner-beings of the inhabitants of the Divine Realm [láhút]; [2] then the radiant, sanctified, and theophanic Eternal Glory in the abstract essences of the inhabitants of the Empyrean of Power [jabarút]; [3] then the gleaming, wondrous Eternal Glory in the veridical identities of the inhabitants of the Kingdom and its Estates [mulk wa’l-malakút]; [4] then that Eternal Glory which is reflected from the first of the four levels of the divine Act, and which God sent down as manifest apparitions into the spiritual realities of the inhabitants of the Realm of Earthly Humanity [násút].*

*Then the sixth letter is the ra’, [1] the universal mercy [raḥmat al-kulliyya] by which God created the Will by itself and before all things, which He then made to be the cause of the totality of the essences. [2] Next, it is the mercy of Inclusive Unity, by which God created the souls that are comprehended in the knowledge of the Book. [3] Next, it is the universal revealed mercy in the station of Determination [qadar], a billowing, surging, fathomless sea in which the judgements of character are marked out. The happy are gladdened by recognition of the abode which God hath created in the furthestmost limits of this station, while the miserable are saddened by their incognizance of what God hath revealed in that billowing, surging and fathomless sea. [4] Next, it is the mercy which encompasses all things, which God*

*made to be as a well of 100 portions [juz‘], just as is explained by ‘Askarí [the 11<sup>th</sup> Imám] in his commentary on the name of God the Compassionate [ar-raḥím]: ‘Only a single portion of compassion is found in this world, and ninety-nine portions are God’s mercy upon His servants on the day of Resurrection, according to what He hath Purposed and Determined in the Book.’ This all-embracing mercy encompasses believers and infidels, and indeed all things. It is that mercy that existentiates and essentiates the essential substances of all possible beings. Verily, God hath made the bearer of that mercy at that station to be Ḥusayn, and therefore he (may my spirit and those of all who dwell in the kingdoms of command and creation be his sacrifice) intercedes with God on the day of Resurrection with an intercession such as no one whatsoever has its like. May God bestow upon me, and upon whomsoever desires the meeting with Him, his intercession on the day of Reckoning. Verily, He is the Ever-Forgiving, in the beginning and in the end.’<sup>2</sup>*

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Something strange is going on here. The Báb, from this example, may appear to us as a rather unusual reader. What notion of text might lie behind such an approach to “interpretation”; what, in other words, can we say about the Báb’s textuality on the basis of passages like these? What, for the Báb, is the process of reading, and what place does meaning have in this interaction of reader and text? These are the questions that I will

explore in what follows.

It would be useful to begin with a framework of textuality, a spectrum of the kinds of readings that can be and are produced. One way of defining such a spectrum can be had by invoking the concepts of the worlds behind and in front of the text.<sup>3</sup>

The world behind the text is the world that generated and produced the text, and of course the author looms large in this world. When our attention is focused on the world behind the text, our assumption is that the text *represents* a single authorial intention. The text is a surface of signifiers, and the author’s communicative intention is the signified. Any interpretive practice that begins with this assumption will look to various features of the world behind the text in order to test or confirm the success of the interpretive movement from the signifying text to the apprehension of the signified intention. Among the features of the world behind the text that this kind of interpretation would most likely attend to include the author’s biography, the historical circumstances, the contemporary character of the language, and intertextuality, or the allusive relationship between this text and other texts that came before it. These features might be thought of as boundaries of the author’s intention, boxing in what we, as the interpreters, may legitimately assume to have been the author’s intended meaning.

Interpretation centered on the world behind the text is one that assumes weak



readers, by which I mean it does not assign to readers a very active or strong role in the production of meaning. The *meaning* is what the author *meant* or intended to communicate, and thus the author and the text are the strong elements in the reader/text interaction. The text is a static structure, its referential, representational, and informative nature pointing to a meaning that is stable and determinate.

The world in front of the text is the world in which the text is received, and this world is populated by readers. It is the ever-changing world of readers in history, who successively encounter the text as well as the various “imaginaries” that have accumulated around the text in the process of the previous readings. By “imaginaries,” I mean the nebulae or auras that surround a text at any given moment in the history of its reception, auras comprising such things as the book’s fame, the concretized evaluation of its worth or general meaning, its assignment to genre and labelling as to literary conventions and so forth. Imaginaries are networks of symbols or associated ideas that serve as screens or lenses through which a text is experienced, and they create expectations in the reader for what he or she is likely to find in a text. Take *Moby Dick*, for example. Its earliest critics could not decide what it was: a romance, a novel, a philosophical enquiry, an adventure tale. But in the course of its history, certain imaginaries have surrounded it, such that we now will “know,” even before picking it up, that it is, first of all, a novel, sec-

ond, a great novel, and third, a great metaphorical novel. This imaginary of *Moby Dick* will impinge upon our reading of the book, and our reading of it will be much different from its earliest readers, who did not read it through the same screen as we do. As Moshe Idel puts it:

Books, especially famous books, possess auras that may enwrap them long before most of their readers open them. The social imagination of certain elites prepares the ground for the acceptance, dissemination, and depth of influence of a book even before it has been conceived by its author. Even more so in the case of books dealing with religious topics that already permeate the faith of many individuals and the praxis of groups and movements. These books, which are founding documents of a religion, ideology, or intellectual movement — that is to say, canonic — are rarely consumed as pure literature and only seldom are able to evince their “proposed worlds” without the mediation of the imaginary that surrounds them and has been accumulated over the centuries and has conferred on them their particular status.<sup>4</sup>

Much has been written in recent literary theory about the world in front of the text and the role of the reader in the process of producing meaning in textual transactions. The significant trend in this literature is the shifting of focus from authorial intention and a view of the text as a static and determinative signifier toward a view of the ever-changing “con-

cretizations” (to use Ingarden’s term)<sup>5</sup> of textual possibilities in the active and constitutive encounter between readers and texts. Whether in so-called reader-response criticism, deconstruction, or reception aesthetic, these theoretical strategies recognize that texts do, in fact, mean many different things in the course of their various receptions, and that the richness of language itself, in its constant historical flux, outweighs the mastery or manipulation of language held by any author. The author, in other words, may have had a single intention, but language itself cannot be so easily reined in. No reader can interact with an author’s intention, but they do interact with language in the text, and this language holds within it and in its dynamic history the possibilities of many, many meanings indeed.

To illustrate the idea of the world in front of the text, consider that, as modern Bahá’ís, we commonly read a given work of Bahá’u’lláh with such questions as what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said about it, what Shoghi Effendi wrote about it, what stories do we have from Hands of the Cause illustrative of its potencies, etc. The prior readings by these figures condition our reading of the Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh but are not related, in the conventional sense, to the world behind the text, to authorial intention. They create horizons of expectation (to use Jauss’s idiom)<sup>6</sup> within which a given Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh is situated in our act of reading. Modern Bahá’ís embody an interpretive community, operating in the world in front of the text, that is constituted

by a set of imaginaries posterior to the text itself, and thus not likely to be involved in a reading of the Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh by another interpretive community.

Now, I began with a *súrah* of the Qur’án and two examples of *tafsír* upon that verse. Obviously, the two commentaries were pursuing very different interpretive strategies, based upon entirely different semiotic assumptions. I would like at this point to very briefly explore and further define these different textualities, with reference to the history of Qur’anic *tafsír* literature. In what follows, my schematization of this history will be necessarily over-simplified. My general characterizations of periods and phases of *tafsír* literature would not hold for every author in the given period, but I think they are nonetheless true to larger trends that I see in the history of this literature.

The classical Sunni *tafsír* literature, exemplified first and foremost by al-Ṭabarí, and crystallized in its most conservative form in Ibn Kathír, was overwhelmingly concerned with the world behind the text. Every scrap of information or detail about the life of Muḥammad and his nascent community that could be seen as relevant to a specific verse or *súrah* was scrupulously sought out and gathered together. The *asbáb al-nuzúl*, or specific circumstances of the revelation of a given verse, were likewise of central importance to the interpretive project of these early *mufasssírún*, and the voluminous *tafsír* works of these authors are teeming with them. Similarly,

exempla of Arabic grammar and its lexicon were teased out of every available specimen of pre-Islamic poetry and Arabic literature, in an attempt to situate the linguistic usages of the Qur'án in their contemporary environment. These writers were following the assumption that the Qur'án was stable in meaning, that its correct interpretation could be gotten at along the lines they pursued into the world behind the text. The early interpretation of a specific Qur'anic passage that well illustrates this is in the exegesis of Q 3:7, of which I give here two translations [emphases added]:

*It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses [muḥkamát] that are the Mother of the Book, and others that are ambiguous [mutashábihát]. As for those in whose heart is deviation, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation [ta'wíl]; and none knows its interpretation save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, "We believe in it; all is from our Lord"; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.*

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*yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.*<sup>7</sup>

These two translations of this verse are obviously very different, the meaning being radically dependent on how you divide up the semantic units. The first version is the one that will be found in the vast majority of English translations of the Qur'án, and represents how the majority of Sunnis have read this verse. The second translation represents the predominant Shí'í (and, subsequently, Bábí-Bahá'í) reading. In the former, the Qur'án is acknowledged to have both clear and ambiguous verses, but the interpretation of the latter are known only to God. Given the classic Sunni approach to tafsír, which assumed a stable and intelligibly signifying character to the Qur'án, it is not surprising that al-Ṭabarí settled on an understanding of the ambiguous verses as meaning the isolated letters that preface certain of the Qur'án's suras. As isolated letters, these are parasemantic in the first place, so it does not challenge the assumption of a stable structure of transparent intelligibility in the Qur'án to identify these as the ambiguous verses whose interpretation is known only to God.

In what has been called classical Shí'í commentary, represented by al-Ṭúsí (d. 1067) and al-Ṭabarsí (d. 1144), and with whom I would class the classical philosophical mufasssírún, such as al-Rázi and al-Zamakhsharí, this narrow understanding of the ambiguous verses is set aside in favor of a recognition of ambiguity throughout much of the Qur'anic text. This phase of tafsír shares a great deal

with the classical Sunni phase: a great deal of attention is given to grammar and lexical oddities, and the world behind the text is turned to for help in clarifying problems in these areas. Likewise, masses of Sunni hadith regarding occasions of revelation and so on are included in their commentaries. But there is a good deal more attention given to the world in front of the text in this phase of tafsír, which could again be well illustrated by the approach taken to Qur'án 3:7. On this verse, Ṭúsí, Ṭabarsí, and al-Rází all take a remarkably similar approach. First, they assume that there are ambiguous verses in the Qur'án beyond just the isolated letters. Second, they read Qur'án 3:7 according to the second version, and generally identify “those firmly rooted in knowledge” with the ‘ulama. But they also attempt to explain the utility of the ambiguous verses, to explain why God would have ordained ambiguity in His Book. Their answer is very interesting, as it involves a direct turn to the world in front of the text and to an assumption of relatively strong readers. For brevity's sake, I quote from Jane McAuliffe's distillation of al-Rází's exegesis of 3:7 and the utility of the ambiguous verses, an argument which recapitulates points advanced earlier by al-Ṭúsí and al-Ṭabarsí:

(1) The greater effort expended in trying to understand them [the ambiguous verses] will secure a greater reward. (2) They provide an opportunity to test and clarify diverse theological views. (3) The need to use reason frees one from ‘the darkness of *taqlid* [blind imi-

tation]’. (4) They require the cultivation of exegetical skills, such as knowledge of language, grammar, and *usul al-fiqh*. (5) Finally, and most importantly, the *mutashabi-hat* [ambiguous verses] suit the Qur'án to the differences in human capacity to receive it, allowing sufficient variety in the modes of revelation to accommodate both the learned and the ignorant.<sup>8</sup>

This view of the multiple unfoldments of textual meaning in the various reader encounters represents a fascinating medieval adumbration of modern reader-response criticism. The various elements of the world in front of the text are, in this phase of the history of tafsír, bound up with the meaning of the text itself. The stability and transparency of the Qur'án as a surface of signifiers is a notion that clearly does not fit with this conception of textuality.

I would add, also, that in this phase of the development of tafsír, the Qur'anic text has, in a sense, absorbed the social text. That is, the hierarchies that defined the social realities of these writers are found by them in their reading of the Qur'án; or, what amounts to the same thing, they read the social text *into* the Qur'anic text. The Qur'anic ambiguities will unfold in hierarchical readings – the commoners will understand what they need for their level, the learned will find more “elite” stages of Qur'anic meaning – and thus the Qur'án, in its readings, will unfold the social hierarchy.

The last stage of the history of tafsír that I would like to consider is that of

later Shí'í exegesis, specifically Akhbárí tafsír, beginning in the late-Safavid period and including, for all intents and purposes, the Shaykhí movement of more recent times. This trend represents a radical break with the previous two. Here there is absolutely no concern for the world behind the text, for the grammatical or lexical background to the Qur'án. The mass of early Sunni hadith which served to situate the Qur'anic verses in a context for earlier interpreters is entirely absent from Akhbárí tafsír. The Akhbárí interpretive innovation is grounded in a view of the Qur'án that begins to emerge in the famous *hadith al-thaqalayn*, or "the tradition of the two weighty legacies." There are dozens of variants of this tradition, so I will quote from a composite form presented by Todd Lawson:

The Prophet said: 'I am soon about to be received . . . I am telling you before I am taken up that I shall leave with you as representatives after me the Book of my Lord, and my progeny, the people of my household. The all-Gracious, all-Knowing told me that they [the two weights, al-thaqalayn] shall not be separated until they meet me [on the Day of Resurrection] . . . Do not precede them, for you would go astray, and do not fall behind them, for you would perish. Do not teach them, for they are of greater knowledge than you.'<sup>9</sup>

In this report, Muḥammad's authority and guidance are seen as being carried into the future by twin representatives –

the Qur'án and the Imáms. It is the identification of these latter two entities in Akhbárí tafsír that is its defining characteristic. The tafsír literature from this period is generally composed of two strata: voluminous citation of sayings of the Imáms (*akhbár*, sing. *khavar*, whence the designation "Akhbárí"), and a reading of the Qur'anic text as a coded narrative of the Imáms and their historical careers. For example, in the chapter of Sayyid Háshim al-Baḥrání's (d. ca. 1695) *al-Burhán* on the clear and ambiguous verses of the Qur'án, the following *khavar* from the sixth Imám is cited:

al-Ṣadiq said: 'We are the people obedience to whom God has made obligatory. To us belongs the booty and to us belongs the best property, and we are those *firmly rooted in knowledge* [Q. 3:7], and we are the objects of envy alluded to in the verse: 'Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of his bounty?' (Q. 4:54).'<sup>10</sup>

Akhbárí tafsír, relying on reports from the Imáms such as this one, reads the entire Qur'án as ambiguous in itself, but capable of being disambiguated by reference to the Imáms.<sup>11</sup> The resultant disambiguation is one that reads nearly every verse of the Qur'án as a hidden statement about the Imáms, their followers, or their enemies. The tragic Qur'anic tales about the rejections faced by the pre-Islamic prophets are not really about pre-Islamic prophets; these tales are about the Imáms and their lack of recognition from the Sunnis. The same formula is applied across the board, to an extent that the modern reader is left

bewildered at what may seem to us as extremely arbitrary readings.

Lawson has referred to this as a process of the “Imámization” of the Qur’án,<sup>12</sup> but I think one can go further.<sup>13</sup> That is, it is not simply that the Qur’án is read here as being a cryptic Imámí mythohistory. It is also the case that the Imáms are understood to be, in a certain sense, Qur’ánic. The Qur’án and the Imáms are assimilated to one another, they are mirrors of one another, and they complement one another. Consider, for example, this statement attributed to the seventh Imám, Músá al-Kázim:

*“Ḥa Mim. By the Perspicious Book! Verily, We have sent it down on a blessed night, to forewarn mankind; on a night when every precept was made plain as a commandment from Ourselves.” [Q. 44:1-4] The letters “ḥa mim” are Muḥammad. . . . The “Perspicious Book” is the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Alí.*<sup>14</sup>

Not only are the Imáms found in the Book — they *are* the Book, this being the implication of identifying references to the *kitáb al-mubin* in the Qur’án with ‘Alí. Furthermore, as is well known, ‘Alí identified himself with the very textual essence of the Qur’án, in that famous statement wherein he says that all of revelation is contained within the point beneath the Arabic letter “bá” the first letter of the Qur’án, and that he is that point.<sup>15</sup>

The complementarity of the Qur’án and the Imáms is heightened by the Akhbárá belief that the Qur’án, as they

had it, was not the entire, or indeed the entirely true, Qur’án as it was revealed by God. This very early Shí’í contention — that verses of the Qur’án which unambiguously referred to the authority of ‘Alí and the family of Muḥammad were taken out, certain non-revealed verses were added, and the original ordering of the Qur’ánic text was violated — was suppressed during the Buwayhid period, but re-emerged in Akhbárá thought.<sup>16</sup> It was subsequently rejected anew in Usúlí-inspired 20<sup>th</sup>-century Shí’í thought, as can be seen by the polemics *against* the notion of a corrupted Qur’án in the tafsírs of Ṭabáṭabá’í and al-Khú’í.<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, there is a great deal at stake in such a belief. If the Qur’án is not entirely as it should be, and if even when it *is* correct it is all codes and secrets, how is the faithful Shí’í to go about his business of being faithful? The Akhbárá answer is that the Imáms knew the whole of the Qur’án, that where they have spoken the path is clear, and that what we do know about the Qur’án is just going to have to be sufficient for the time being. This complementarity was symbolized by the terms “Silent Book” (the Qur’án) and “Speaking Book” (The Imáms). In itself, the coded and, indeed corrupted Qur’án was mute, but the Imáms spoke with the voice of the Qur’án — they were the Qur’án speaking to the community in history.

At the time that these attitudes and approaches were developing, however, the Imáms were *not* speaking to the community in history. This is 17<sup>th</sup>- through 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, the time of the Greater

Occultation. The Book is entirely ambiguous, and the Imáms are themselves silent. The implication is clear: not only is the community awaiting the return of the Hidden Imám, they're waiting also for the return of the Hidden Qur'án. The two have been identified with one another to such an extent in Shí'í discourse that they've become, in a sense, a single messianic figure. So, for example, this *khavar* from the fifth Imám is cited by Muḥsin Fayḍ Káshání (d. 1680) in his Akhbárá tafsír, *al-Safi*:

*Al-Baqir said: 'If the Book of God had not been added to and subtracted from, our right (haqqana) would not be obscure to anyone with understanding. When the Qa'im arises, he will correctly read the Qur'án.'*<sup>18</sup>

Káshání himself, after affirming in his own words that the Qur'án has been excised, altered, and rearranged, has this to say:

The Qur'án which is in our hands must be followed during the occultation of the twelfth Imám. It must be assumed that the true Qur'án is with him.<sup>19</sup>

To reflect for a moment on the kind of textuality implicit in these Akhbárá approaches to the Qur'án, I would first of all emphasize that the world in front of the text has swallowed up the text, as it were. There is no world behind the text in any meaningful sense, nor is the text seen as a stable semiotic structure. Pulsing *beneath* and *within* the surface of signs that make up the Qur'án, the tragic salvation history of the Shí'a is unfold-

ing. I remarked earlier how classical Shí'í and philosophical approaches to the text led to an absorption of the social text by the Qur'anic text, of the hierarchical social reality being activated by the history of the text's readings. With Akhbárá textuality, the Qur'án has continued to expand beyond the covers of a book, and is now a mirror of the community of Its readers. The Qur'án and the Shí'a are living a shared experience of loss, of oppression, of abuse at the hands of the Sunni majority. Only the messianic age can alter this reality, and the One that is Promised, awaited, and prayed for, is not simply a returned Imám — it is just as much a renovated Qur'án.

There is one other element of Akhbárá Shí'í thought that must be noted before we turn to considering the Báb's readings of the Qur'án. This is what could be called the divinization of the Imáms. This was especially developed in the Shaykhí movement, wherein the Imáms were seen not simply as the legitimate leaders and guides of the community and the knowers of the true Qur'án; they were seen, in the shaykhíyya, as nothing less than the creators of the cosmos. Shaykh Aḥmad, as is well known, was considered to have been skirting the lines of heresy in his belief that the Imáms were the four Aristotelian causes of the universe.<sup>20</sup> The pre-existent lights of the Fourteen Infallibles — Muḥammad, Fátima, and the twelve Imáms — were understood as the generative energies of the coming-into-being of all things, as the substratum of all existence, as the inmost essence of reality by which all

things subsisted. The Imáms, then, are not simply persons, they are cosmic powers. The primordial essence of the Fourteen Infallibles is identified with the Primal Will, a concept which functions in Shaykhí thought much the same way it functions in Bahá'í theology.

I would argue that there are then three imaginaries coming from this Akhbárí – and ultimately Shaykhí – milieu which provide the context for understanding what appears, at first blush, to be the Báb's strange reading.

- First, the imaginary of the Imám/Qur'án assimilation. The Imáms and the Qur'án are identified with one another. The idiom used to indicate this connection is textual rather than personal. That is, it is more that the Imám is seen, according to this imaginary, as a Book than it is that the Qur'án is seen as a person.
- Second, the messianic imaginary that enwraps these two identified entities of Imám and Qur'án. As the Imáms are textualized – imagined in terms of points, letters, books – so the messianic return will be a textual eschaton, the renovation of a clear and speaking Book. Also, as the Qur'án is corrupted, incomplete, the messianic expectation for the Imám is bound up with an expectation for a restored Qur'anic text.
- Third, the imaginary of the cosmic or divinized Imáms, or what I would call the ontological imaginary of the Imáms. The Imáms,

according to this view, are the creators and sustainers of the cosmos, and are thus assimilated to other concepts of cosmic creativity, such as the Primal Will, or the seven instrumental stages of coming-into-being (i.e., Will, Purpose, Determination, Decree, Permission, Fixed Time, and Book).<sup>21</sup>

With these concepts in hand, I think we can find a way into the Báb's notion of texts, reading, and meaning. They combine, in the context of the Báb's declaration of messianic fulfilment, into an ontological imaginary of the messiah as text, which leads, in the Báb's messianic Qur'án commentaries, to a world-renovating cosmicization of the non-semantic units of the text.

This may seem an impossibly obscure way to put things, so let me attempt to unpack this statement. The three imaginaries are explicitly linked together in a lengthy introduction to the Báb's commentary on the Súrat al-'Aṣr, in which He provides the following schema for the homologous unfoldment of the cosmos, of the text, and of sacred history.

<i>Cosmic Levels</i>	<i>Textual Levels</i>	<i>Historical Manifestations</i>
Primal Will	Point	Muḥammad
Purpose	Soft Alif	'Alí
Determination	Occulted Alif	Ḥasan
Decree	Upright Alif	Ḥusayn
Permission	Letters as such	The Imáms
Fixed Time	Joined Letters	The Remnant of God, the Promised One
Book	Word	Fāṭima



This is what the Báb says by way of introduction to the seventy-three individual letter-commentaries that He proceeds to give in this tafsír, one for each letter of the Súrat al-‘Aşr.

*Verily, in every letter of the Qur’án there are many stations. Rather, God hath created in one verse the reality of all that hath been given the name “thing” . . .*

- *Among the stations of the letters of the Qur’án is the level of the Point in the stations of the Act [= Will].<sup>22</sup> This station hath been specialized unto Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, the blessings of God be upon Him and His family.*

- *Among them is the level of the “soft alif.” That is the station manifesting the second level of the levels of the Act [= Purpose]. Truly, God, in the subtleties of His wisdom and the greatness of His providence hath made that station to be specialized unto the regent [waşî] of His Beloved [Muḥammad], [that is,] ‘Alí, upon him be peace.*

- *And among them is the level of the “occulted alif,” the pure theophanic and eternal glory [şamadániyyah], the light of divinity, the letter of the manifestation of the divine ipseity, the sign of Exclusive Unity in the human reality. Verily, in that station this letter is for Ḥasan — upon whom be peace — and indicates the level of the manifestation of trinity in the level of Determination [qadar].*

- *And among them is the “upright alif,” which is the station*

*of the manifestation of the Name of God, the Slayer [al-mumít] in the levels of the Act, and the beginning of the cause of Decree [qadá’]. Verily, God hath decreed that the bearer of that station be Abu ‘Abd Alláh al-Ḥusayn, upon whom be peace. Verily he/it [Ḥusayn, the upright alif] is the letter of command by which the heavens and the earth were established in a manner which none knows but God and whomsoever He has created in a level above those of Ḥusayn’s grandfather [i.e., Muḥammad], his father [‘Alí], and his brother [Ḥasan] — the blessings of God be upon them. How luminous are the wonders!*

- *And [further,] among them is the letter in the station of Permission [maqám al-idhn]. It is the station of letters as such and is specially designated for the Suns of Grandeur [the Imáms], the blessings of God be upon them.*

- *And among them is the letter in the station of the assembled letters, the level of Fixed Time [ajal], and is the light of the Remnant of God . . .*

- *And among them is the letter in the station of the word, and it is the level of the Book in the sense of the conclusion of judgements [khiṭáb]. Verily God hath determined the status of that letter unto Fáṭima — the blessings of God be upon her.<sup>23</sup>*

This explicit identification of the imaginaries of book, cosmos, and manifestation is essential to the Báb’s mes-

sianic performance. The reading of Súrat al-‘Aşr that it leads into is consistently cosmic in its concerns, each letter being treated as a reality or spiritual force operating at each of the four levels of the Báb’s universe.

The Báb’s “commentaries” – with the exception of the *Tafsír Súrat al-baqara*, which was written prior to His declaration of mission – are distinct from any previous tradition of Qur’anic tafsír in that they are enunciative of the inauguration of the messianic moment; they simultaneously enact the renovation of the world and of the Qur’án. They were not simply written as expositions of the Qur’anic text, with the ostensible purpose of clarifying the meaning of the words and phrases used in that Book. Three of His lengthiest Qur’anic commentaries – the *Qayyúm al-‘Asmá’*, the *Tafsír Súrat wa’l-‘Aşr*, and the *Tafsír Súrat al-kawthar* – were all “written” in public, they were “performances” that had as their purpose the communication of the Báb’s messianic claims. They were thus written in settings such that the Báb’s “readings” of the Qur’án were simultaneously messianic enunciations.

Shaykh Ḥasan-i-Zunuzí, in a narrative preserved from Him by Nabil in the *Dawn-Breakers*, has this to say about the nine full commentaries of the Qur’án written by the Báb whilst the latter was imprisoned at Mah-ku:

In connection with one of these commentaries, the Báb one day asked me: ‘Which do you prefer, this commentary which I have revealed, or the Ahsanu’l-Qisas,

My previous commentary on the Surih of Joseph? Which of the two is superior, in your estimation?’ ‘To me,’ I replied, ‘the Ahsanu’l-Qisas seems to be endowed with greater power and charm.’ He smiled at my observation and said: ‘You are as yet unfamiliar with the tone and tenor of this later commentary. The truths enshrined in this will more speedily and effectively enable the seeker to attain the object of his quest.’

*Dawn-Breakers*, p. 31

The object of such a quest, we can infer, was the recognition of the Promised One.

The Shí’í eschatological imagination was a rich and many-splendored thing. There were a great many roles and expected deeds that the community assumed the Promised One would fulfil in His restoration of justice to a world plunged into injustice and oppression. The pre-messiah world, in a sense, was seen as broken, the cosmic order in disarray, the Qur’án corrupted, and the Qá’im alone, at some long-awaited time, was going to put things back in order. The way in which He was going to do so was worked out in advance, in detail, and these details constituted the imaginary of the end, expectations that filled the minds of the Shí’a to whom the Báb spoke. What I would like to emphasize here is that the Báb, in choosing to express His self-consciousness as the Promised One in such a textual way, engaged these eschatological expectations by shifting them into a textual register. This shift, as I tried to show above,

had already started with the imaginary of the Imámized Qur'án, but the Báb took this much, much further.

As you might have already guessed, the Qur'anic text, for the Báb, will not fit so well into our schema of readings, with the worlds behind and in front of the text. It is not primarily a surface of signs, pointing to extrinsic meanings, so the question of whether meaning is in the author, the text, or the reader is in a sense totally irrelevant. The Báb's Qur'án is a cosmic Qur'án. Its letters are generative, primordial substances that create and sustain the universe. The text lies behind all possible worlds, so if there is any "meaning" to be extracted from it, it is cosmographic. Since the text unfolds in a way homologous to the cosmos, the cosmic structure can be described in terms of the Qur'án's structure. Bábí semiotics is thus not meaningfully distinct from its cosmology. The "re-revealing" of the Qur'án, through the Báb's commentaries and other writings, are thus recreations of the cosmos. The same is true of the unfoldment of the human being, of time, of religious communities, all of which are enwrapped in textual symbolism in the Báb's Writings.

As we saw in the Imámi traditions that I quoted earlier, the Promised One was expected to restore, not only the cosmos, but the Qur'án as well. In the words of the fifth Imám: "When the Qá'im arises, He will correctly read the Qur'án." In the *Qayyúm al-'Asmá'*, the text which signaled the Báb's arising as the Qá'im, there is a passage closely patterned after Qur'án, 3:7:

*Verily, We have sent down unto Our servant this Book, from the presence of God and in Truth, and have made therein clear verses [muḥkamát], and no ambiguous verses [ghayr mutashábihát]. None knoweth the interpretation [ta'wíl] thereof save God, and whomsoever We have willed from among the sincere and devoted servants of God. So ask of its interpretation from the Remembrance, for He, by the grace of God, is knowing with regard to God's verses and in accordance with the decree of the Book.*<sup>24</sup>

The Báb declares here, in the midst of what is outwardly a tafsír, a commentary, a reading, that His reading is itself a re-revealing of the Book, and that this Book has *no* ambiguous verses. The oppression of the Book is ended.

The Báb combined both of the expected redemptive functions into one act. He textualized His own messianic identity, assuming the title of Primal Point – the point from which all things, cosmic and textual, emerge. This is of course an identity drawing from the primordial sentence of the Qur'anic text, the *bis-malláh*, which consists of four words, totalling nineteen letters, the first of which begins with a point. Each of these nineteen letters, according to the Báb, spawned six súrahs, giving us the total 114 súrahs of the Qur'án. In the same way, He, the Point, and the Eighteen Letters of the Living, brought into being the members of His community, which were further identified by the Báb with textual realities. A similar unfoldment of this Qur'anic symbolism can be seen

operating in every aspect of the religious world that the Báb created, from the Badí‘ calendar to ritual practice, from talismanic magic to the expectations of the Promised One of the Bábí dispensation. The latter – “He Whom God will make manifest” – was to be the “Speaking Book” to the “Silent Bayán,” was to reveal the complete Bayán, left unfinished by the Báb, and was to produce an ordering of the Bayánic text that Shoghi Effendi understood as a re-ordering of the world.<sup>25</sup>

The sense in which the Báb is a “strong reader” should by now be obvious. The Báb recognizes no constraints in the Qur’anic text that would limit the direction his reading would go. Neither sentences, nor phrases, nor even words are seen by the Báb as ultimately significant. The focus of the Báb’s “readings” are not the signifying, semantic units of the texts, but rather what he sees as their substantive, cosmic reality. The individual letters, having in themselves no semantic content, are nonetheless the essence of the text and indeed of the world. His reading is strong, or active in the most radical sense. His readings not only reconstitute the text, they recreate the world in which that text will be read.

## Notes

1. Abridged translation of Ibn Kathír’s commentary on Súrat al-‘Aşr, from *Tafsír al-Qur’án al-Karím li-Ibn Kathír*, online at [www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/tafseer/103.htm](http://www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/tafseer/103.htm).
2. *Tafsír Súrat wa’l-‘aşr*, pp. 36-9.
3. My definition and use of these concepts is

inspired by, but not identical to Ricoeur’s notion of the “world of the text.” See his *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 240f.

4. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 112.
5. See his “On the Cognition of the Literary Work of Art,” p. 193.
6. Developed in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. See also McAuliffe, “Text and Textuality,” pp. 69 and 75n 76.
7. Adapted from the two translations given by Stefan Wild, “Self-Referentiality,” p. 423, which he calls the “majority” and “minority” readings, respectively.
8. “Text and Textuality,” p. 65.
9. “Akhhbárí Shí’í approaches to Tafsír,” p. 178.
10. Adapted from *ibid*, p. 191
11. There is even a *khavar* from the sixth Imám according to which the Imáms are the unambiguous verses:

Abú ‘Abd Alláh [Ja’far al-Şádiq] said, with regard to God’s saying – exalted be He – {It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses [*muḥkamát*] that are the Mother of the Book} that these are the Commander of the Faithful [‘Alí] and the Imáms; {and others that are ambiguous [*mutashábi-hát*]}, and these are So-and-so and So-and-so [i.e., Abu Bakr and ‘Umar]. {As for those in whose heart is deviation}, these are their companions and followers [i.e., the Sunnis]. {They follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation [*ta’wíl*]; and none knows its interpretation save only God and those firmly rooted in knowledge.} These last are the Commander of the Faithful and the Imáms.

Kulayní, *Uşúl al-Káfi*, 1:482; the text in braces is from Q. 3:7.

12. See Lawson, *Qur’án Commentary*, p. 21.
13. Lawson himself goes further; in “Akhhbárí Shí’í approaches to Tafsír,” p. 203, he writes of “the fusion of Imam and text,” and then alludes to the “culmination of this process in the Qur’án commentaries of the Báb.”
14. From Kulayní, *Uşúl al-Káfi*, 1:552.
15. These traditions are not found in main-

stream Shí'í collections, though the Báb quoted them frequently in His writings, as did Shaykh Aḥmad before Him and Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him. See, e.g., *Bayán-i fársí*, váhid 3, Báb 12, for "I am the Point beneath the bá'," and the *Tafsír Ḥurúf al-basmala*, INBA 14, p. 57, for the longer version, in which 'Alí is quoted as saying: "the essence of the bas-mala is in the bá', and the essence of the bá' is in the point, and I am the Point beneath the bá'." The statement "I am the Point beneath the bá'" is commonly attributed to Abú Bakr al-Shiblí (d. 945) in such well-known works as Ibn al-'Arabí's *Futuḥát al-Makkiyya*, p. 83, al-Ghazálí's *Iḥyá' 'Ulúm al-Dín*, p. 1028, and Qushayrî's *Risála*, p. 69 (these page numbers are to the online editions of these books at [www.alwaraq.com](http://www.alwaraq.com)).

The earliest source that I am aware of in which this saying is put in the mouth of 'Alí is Rajab Bursí's 14<sup>th</sup>-century *Masháriq Anwár al-Yaqín* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami lil-Matbu'at, 1970, p. 22). There's a complete form quoted by Qundúzí (d. 1877) in his *Yanábí' al-Mawwada* (Najaf: Matbu'at al-Hadariyya, 1965), p. 79: "Know that the essences [*al-asrár*] of all of the heavenly books are contained in the Qur'án, and all that is in the Qur'án is within [*Súrat*] al-Fátiḥa, and all that is in al-Fátiḥa is in the bas-mala, and all that is in the bas-mala is in the bá', and all that is in the bá' is in the point, and I am the Point beneath the bá'." A very similar version appears in a Bábí treatise in INBA 80, pp. 293f. The anonymous "al-qatíl" also quotes a similar form of the extended version of this tradition in his/her *Risála*, in *Zuhúr al-Haqq*, 3:518. See also William McCants, "Grammar of the Divine," note 2.

16. See Lawson, *Qur'án Commentary*, p. 3; Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, pp. 39-45 and 218-19, on the "censorship" of anti-Sunni material in Shí'í Tafsírs during this period.

17. See, for example, al-Khú'í's (d. 1992)

*Prolegomena to the Qur'án* (trans. A.A. Sachedina, Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 7, "The Protection of the Qur'án from Alteration," where he presents a point-by-point refutation of earlier Shí'í beliefs in the alteration or corruption of the Qur'anic text.

18. Lawson, "Akhbárí Shí'í," p. 183.

19. Ibid. p. 187; this is M. Ayoub paraphrasing Káshání.

20. "The Imams are the four causes of the created things. They are the efficient cause; they are the material cause — that is, their [primordial] lights and shadows [are the material from which all things were made]; they are the formal cause, in the apportioning of the capacities of all things for good and for evil; they are the final cause, inasmuch as all things were created for their sake." (From Sharḥ al-ziyára, quoted in *ál al-Ṭálaqání*, al-Shaykhiyya, p. 288.)

21. On these seven, see Jadhání, "Marátib-i sab'a," and infra, note 22.

22. The stations or levels of the Act (*marátib al-fi'l*): this is a technical term of esoteric Shi'ism, and is found throughout the writings of Shaykh Aḥmad and the Báb, wherein it refers to the seven levels of the coming into being of all things mentioned by the sixth Imám, Ja'far al-Ṣádiq, in the following tradition: "Nothing on earth or in heaven comes into being but by these seven qualities: will (*mashiyya*), purpose (*iráda*), determination (*qadar*), decree (*qaḍá*), permission (*idhn*), book (*kitáb*), and fixed time (*ajal*)." (From Kulayní, *Uṣúl al-Káfi*, 1:200). The order of the last two was for some unknown reason reversed by Shaykh Aḥmad, and this tradition was invariably quoted by the Báb with *kitáb* as the last of the seven.

In another tradition, from the seventh Imám, Músá al-Kázim, we learn: "Nothing comes into being but that God willed it, purposed it, determined it, and decreed it." ['Alí b. Ibráhím al-Hashimí] asked: 'What does will mean?' He said: 'It

means the beginning of the Act (*ibtidá' al-fi'l*).” (From *ibid.*, 1:201). These two Akhbár provide a classical Imámí basis for the Shaykhí and Bábí usage of the phrase *marátib al-fi'l*. For Shaykh Aḥmad’s usage, see, e.g., *Sharḥ al-ziyára*, 2:110f. The Báb defines His own usage later in the *Tafsír wa'l-‘aṣr* itself, where He writes:

*Faith in the levels of the Act and the manifestations of the acted-upon has been made obligatory for all, according to the command of al-Ṣádiq, regarding the allotments of the basis of the Act: ‘Nothing on earth or in heaven comes into being but by the following seven: will, purpose, determination, decree, permission, fixed time, and book, and whoever maintains that they are one less than these has thereby become an infidel’.*

*Tafsír wa'l-‘aṣr*, p. 124.

23. *Tafsír wa'l-‘aṣr*, pp. 12-18; my translation is abridged.
24. *Qayyúm al-Asmá’*, sura 3 (*al-ímán*), p. 9.
25. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 146f., and *God Passes By*, pp. 25f. For a discussion of this interpretation, with reference to previous treatments in the secondary literature, see Ismael Velasco, “Fixing the Gaze: Reflections on the ‘Order of Bahá’u’lláh’ in the Báb’s Persian Bayan,” forthcoming.

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# Chronicles of a Birth

## Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions in Spain (1850-1853)

*Amín E. Egea*

*translated from Spanish by Francisco Díaz*

### Introduction

The beginnings of the Bábí-Bahá'í movement would have probably been unknown to the West were it not for the bloody and dramatic episodes that accompanied its birth and development. The brilliant growth it experienced from its inception, its doctrines — profoundly heretical to the Shí'a clergy — and the influence it exerted across all of Persia's social classes caused ecclesiastic and government authorities alike to fear a force capable of putting an end to the former's influence and the latter's despotic power. From government circles to pulpits, all efforts were focused on eliminating the "misguided sect."

The tragic beginnings of the nascent Faith did not go unnoticed in a Europe that, at the time, was entering the closing stages of romanticism. From Persia issued forth testimony from Western travelers, missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and government officials who, directly or indirectly, had witnessed the earliest days of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. Their accounts, though not always accurate and at times based on distorted information or even rumor, helped to introduce the term "Bábí" to the West.

Reaction in the old continent on the part of those that did not remain indifferent to the existence of a new religious movement in Persia may be classified, in general terms, into two categories. On the one hand were those moved by the tragic circumstances surrounding the emergence of the new religion, who, as a result, perceived it as a religious and progressive movement falling victim to the intransigence and fanaticism of a society deeply rooted in its reactionary ways. On the other hand were those that saw the new movement as a local problem, one political in nature, threatening the stability of a weak and fragile kingdom — of geostrategic importance to foreign powers — being shaken constantly by domestic convulsions. In either case, interest was aroused to the degree that some intellectuals embarked on academic research into the new religion and the Bábí Faith was granted an audience in the European press, inspired works by several artists — both in literary and theatrical circles — and opened the floodgates of diplomatic dispatches issuing from several Western delegations stationed in Central Asia, Asia Minor, and the Near East.

The Bahá'í Faith is, undoubtedly, the



religion offering the largest trove of documentary materials for its study. Professor Moshe Sharon, holder of the Chair in Bahá'í Studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, referring to the challenges facing his department, affirmed without exaggeration:

The work ahead is tremendous, the material awaiting the researchers is staggering. At least a century will be needed only to study the enormous quantities of the literary texts and other documents.<sup>1</sup>

For example, of the sacred Bábí-Bahá'í literature, only a portion of which has been translated and published, there are thousands of manuscripts extant. The number of sources available to researchers to document Bábí and Bahá'í history is equally copious and not merely limited to the great many accounts handed down by those connected to the historical facts themselves, but rather, as mentioned earlier, include the contributions of numerous external eyewitnesses.

Bahá'í historiography has made extensive use of these latter types of sources, which, though not free from inaccuracies, have served to complement and contrast Bahá'í-based historical accounts and shed light on Western perceptions of the new religion at the time.

Surely Shoghi Effendi was the first Bahá'í author to make systematic use of this type of documentary source. In his translation and adaptation of Nabíl-i-Zarandí's chronicle known as *The Dawn-Breakers*, for example, he made use of numerous references to the well-known accounts of Comte de Gobineau, E. G.

Browne, A. L. M. Nicolas, and Lord Curzon, works that he himself researched and studied during his enrollment at Oxford. He also used references to the Faith from non-Bahá'í authors in his history of the first century of the Bahá'í Era, *God Passes By*. As editor of the *Bahá'í World* yearbooks, he should probably also be credited for including the section titled "References to the Bahá'í Faith." The Guardian, moreover, expanded and consolidated the collection of newspaper accounts from the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Today, this collection includes over 47,000 press clippings covering practically all the relevant facts and events pertaining to Bahá'í history from the declaration of the Báb until the present day.

Now-classic Western accounts of Bahá'í history have also availed themselves of non-Bahá'í authors to document events; one notable example is H. M. Balyuzi's trilogy about the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith. Especially noteworthy, too, is Dr. Moojan Momen's *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844-1944*. Today required reading for any scholar of Bábí-Bahá'í history, the latter volume represents the most comprehensive collection of non-Bahá'í historical sources in the English-speaking world.

With the conviction that the Bábí and Bahá'í religions would have aroused in Spain, a curiosity comparable to that which swept through other European countries, in mid-1996 began to search for references made in the country to both religions from the period between

1844 and 1947.<sup>2</sup> This research project has so far unearthed over 180 references in the daily press, in more than thirty books, and in assorted journals and manuscripts.

The many references found in the daily press cover the years 1850, 1852, 1853, 1873, 1882, 1883, 1889, 1896, and 1903. In addition to these, references have been found in variety, political, scientific, and religious magazines and journals.

In the literary field, references of varying lengths have been found in the works of several Spanish authors such as philologist Francisco G. Ayuso; diplomat, politician, and writer Juan Valera; and writer and aristocrat Emilia de Pardo y Bazán; among others, in addition to translations of foreign authors such as Ernest Renan, Arminius Vambery, and Eliseo Reclus, to cite a few. Also worthy of special mention are dictionary and encyclopedia entries of the period, the oldest of which dates back to 1854.

Furthermore, interesting contributions from Spanish clerics stationed in Palestine, North Africa, and Spain itself, as well as a consular dispatch from Turkey, have been discovered.

This article will present a cursory overview of the earliest references found to date, focusing on documents pertaining to the years 1850 through 1853. Research relating to subsequent periods will be presented in future occasions.

### 1850: Earliest References

Undoubtedly, 1850 was the most tragic

year in the short life of the Bábí dispensation. Government and religious authorities allied themselves to relentlessly deal their most vicious blows aimed at stemming the then burgeoning religious community.

One such blow was the savage massacre of a good number of the people of the city of Zanján. Led by the principal ‘ulamá of the city, Mullá Muḥammad-’Alí, surnamed Ḥujjat (The Proof), between three and five thousand Bábís, according to sources, resisted during several months the royal troops’ barrage while under siege in a section of the city.

The brutal military attack ordered by the youthful monarch Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh – for whom, in the second year of his reign, the progress of the newborn religious community signified a disturbing development, one of many crises he had had to confront since ascending to the throne – and the dramatic heroism and courage demonstrated by the besieged believers did not fail to attract the attention of certain Westerners stationed in Persia.

On 24 October 1850, three Madrid newspapers – *El Católico*, *La Esperanza*, and *La Nación* – published the following story almost verbatim:

News reports arriving from Teheran on 30 August describe Persia as being absorbed in a state of anarchy difficult to describe. The reforms the youthful Shah has attempted to introduce in the country have generally met with resistance and, in the end, have not produced the results that had

been hoped for. The government, nevertheless, has struck back forcefully on repeated occasions, and it appears that it will pursue vigorously the enemies of law and order.

The last remaining Bábís have succumbed in a city in Azerbaijan named Zongan, which has been utterly leveled by the royal troops. The high priest of Tabris has been arrested and taken to the capital, under heavy escort, for having fueled the Bábí rebellion. [sic]

Two points here deserve elaboration. First of all, Zanján was still under siege when the dispatch from Persia used as the source of information was issued. In fact, the Sháh's troops could not have forced the surrender of the final stronghold of besieged Bábís until sometime between late-December and early-January 1851.

News of the arrest and deportation to Tehran of a high-ranking cleric in Tabriz has no parallel in the history of the Faith. An article published in the 12 September 1850 edition of the *Gazzeta Ufficiale di Venezia*, which uses dispatches from Tehran dated 31 July as sources and, moreover, contains firsthand accounts of the disturbances in Zanján, may shed light on the subject. The newspaper reports the following:

The Sheik Al Islam from Aderbigian (a large province the capital of which is Tabris), a very influential person and one of the great dignitaries of the Empire, was arrested and led to Teheran by order of the Emir Nizam. He is

accused of having conspired together with his son in order to increase the power of the clergy to the prejudice of the State.<sup>3</sup>

We can infer from the clues offered by this separate account that the "high priest of Tabris" referred to by the news item published in Madrid is none other than Hájí Mírzá 'Alí-Aşghar, the Shaykhu'l-Islám, who in June 1850 was deported to Tehran, together with his nephew, not because he had any connection whatsoever to the Bábís, but rather because of his involvement in the showdown then between the clergy of Tabriz and government officials.<sup>4</sup>

On 6 November 1850, *El Barcelonés*, a Catalan newspaper, devoted, as was customary among most Spanish dailies of the time, a brief section to international news. A meeting of the Council of Ministers of the French Republic, hostilities between Austria and Prussia, and Russian troop movements were some of the news items offered that day. The following was published alongside:

Dispatches from Tehran report that the head of the Bábí religion, together with twelve of his followers, has been executed by firing squad in Tauris. One of the religion's principal dogmas is the proclamation of women's fundamental rights, and the number of converts it is daily acquiring from among the ranks of the fairer sex is rather considerable. Of those that engaged the Sháh's troops in one recent battle, over one thousand were women, who fought with admirable courage.<sup>5</sup>

Little could readers back then suspect that “the head of the Bábí religion” mentioned in the brief article was none other than the “Exalted Word,” “the Primal Point,” that Inaugurator of a New Era promised in former religions.

The details concerning the Báb’s execution are sufficiently well known that they require no further elaboration here. As is common knowledge, the Báb was not executed together with twelve followers but only one, Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí-i-Zunúzí, surnamed Anís. The report then makes reference anew to the conflict in Zanján and mentions the high proportion of women that fought against the royal troops. It is rather interesting to note how in 1850 the Báb’s doctrine concerning equality of the sexes eclipses all others.

### **1852-1853: Assassination Attempt against the Sháh of Persia**

On 15 August 1852, the Sháh of Persia, Náṣiri’d-Dín, became the target of an assassination attempt in which several Bábís were implicated. Gobineau describes the incident:

In the morning, the king went out for a horseback ride. Before him, as usual, went equerries carrying long lances, grooms leading horses with embroidered saddle cloths, and a group of nomad riders with their rifles slung over the shoulder and their swords hanging from their saddles. This vanguard preceded the king in order that he might not be annoyed by the dust raised by the cavalry, and the king

followed along slowly, a little distance from the retinue of the great lords, chiefs and officers who accompanied him everywhere. He was near the palace and had barely passed the small door of the garden of Muḥammad-Ḥasan, Sanduq-dár or treasurer of the Savings, when he noticed, at the side of the road, three men, three gardeners, standing two on the left, and one on the right side, seemingly waiting for him. He did not suspect danger and rode on. When quite close, he saw them bow very low and he heard them cry out together, ‘We are your sacrifice! We make a request.’ This is the traditional formula, but instead of remaining aloof as is customary, they rushed on him repeating, ‘We make a request!’ Surprised, the king shouted, ‘Rascals, what do you want?’ At that moment, the man on his right took hold of the bridle of the horse and fired upon the king. In the meantime, the two men on the left fired also. One of the shots cut the collar of pearls adorning the horse’s neck, another riddled with buckshot the right arm and back of the king. Immediately, the man on the right pulled on the leg of His Majesty and would have unsaddled him, had it not been that the two assassins on the left were pulling on the other side. The king was striking his assailants on the head with his fists, while the jumping of the frightened horse paralyzed their efforts and delayed their aggression. The royal retinue, at first dumbfounded, hurried towards their master. Asadu’lláh Khán, the grand equer-

ry, and one of the nomad riders killed the man on the right with their swords. In the meantime, several lords threw down the other two men and bound them.<sup>6</sup>

Even though the Bábí community as a whole had no involvement in the foiled regicide and the perpetrators – between three and six in number, according to sources – had acted independently, still the attempt served to fan the authorities' hostility toward the Bábís and vindicated those that would portray the new religion as a movement fundamentally political in nature.<sup>7</sup>

News of the attempted assassination of the Persian Monarch and the consequences it had on the Bábí community was widely reported by several European and American newspapers.

The earliest reports of the unfortunate incident began to reach Spain by mid-October 1852. On 11 October, *El Diario de Cataluña* published what is known to be the earliest news report in Spain concerning the event:

PERSIA. News arriving from Smyrna reports grave disturbances in Persia. Four men, assuming the most humble demeanor, approached the Schah while he was out on a hunting expedition. One of the men handed the Schah a petition, which he took. Suddenly, the petitioner's companions each fired their pistol at His Majesty at nearly point-blank range. One of the weapons misfired; the other two each wounded the monarch. Reports of his death having spread following the event, the Kurds and

other nomadic tribes of the region and the mountain areas revolted. The number of rebels belonging to the tribe of the Bab, an avowed enemy of the reigning Kaggia dynasty, has increased. Ahmet Weffyle-Effendi, Ottoman Ambassador who at the time was in the little village of Karamdera, lost his luggage in the ensuing chaos, though, they say, it was returned to him a few days later.<sup>8</sup>

Although the news does not explicitly implicate the Bábís in the assassination attempt, it nevertheless makes them out to be an enemy tribe of the reigning dynasty. On 12 October, the daily *El Correo de Barcelona* published the same story almost verbatim, identifying *L'Impartial de Smyrne* as the source of information.

In the days that followed, other Spanish dailies continued publishing new information on the attempt, which was then circulated by the various news agencies. On 13 and 14 October, several Madrid and Barcelona newspapers published a news item that had been reported one week earlier in the *Standard* based on reports received from Constantinople by way of Tabriz and Erzerum. The news item, as published by *El Diario Español*, reads as follows:

PERSIA

The Shah has nearly become a victim of religious fanaticism. On 13 September, two men opened fire during an assassination attempt that left him wounded, though not critically, according to the medical examination.

The following account, which we have copied from an English daily, details the events that transpired:

The Emperor, accompanied by his Prime Minister and a sizeable entourage, had gone out that morning on a hunting party. Upon reaching the edge of a forest near Maceranda, six poorly dressed men approached the Shah bearing assorted petitions, bringing his horse to a standstill. It is customary in that nation for the Sovereign to proceed alone some distance ahead of his retinue. Having delivered their requests, the petitioners, of the Babi sect, surrounded the Shah and, in a threatening manner, began to demand redress for the harm caused their religion by the murder of their leader. The Shah boldly ordered them off, but before his retinue could catch up, two of the ruffians opened fire, injuring him in the mouth and thigh, respectively. The zealots immediately tried to escape; two were captured and brought to Tehran. The Shah's wounds were so slight that the next day he proceeded with great pomp to the mosque to offer his thanksgiving over having been spared. On his return to the palace, the Ministers of Prussia and England, and the Chargé d'Affaires of the Porte, came to offer him congratulations.

Joy swept through the entire city, which was lit up at night. Two more of the assassins were rounded up on the 16th

of the month. They had hid in a well from which they were pulled out by order of the Prime Minister.

Another dispatch, also reporting about the attempt, closes with the following paragraph:

Doctor Cloquet has extracted two of the bullets embedded in the Shah; removal of a third bullet has proven elusive. It is believed, however, that the Shah's life is not in danger.<sup>9</sup>

On 22 and 23 October, some newspapers reproduced information published in *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-Ittifaqíyyih* about the attempt against the life of the Sháh of Persia:

PERSIA. The *Official Gazette* of Teheran gives the following account of the attempt against the Shah, of which our readers are already aware:

"We have already spoken of the horrible attempt against the person of the Sovereign by several criminals belonging to the Babi sect. All we can hope for is to allay the fears of the Prince's faithful subjects by announcing to them that their beloved Sovereign is perfectly well. Nevertheless, following are the details of the plot:

On 28 Shawwal, H.M. left the city on a hunting party to the outskirts of Tihiran; His Excellency the Prime Minister, Mustapha el-Mawalek, and the King of Arms, Assad-Oulaud-Klau, along with other dignitaries of the realm, accompanied H.M. on foot out of the

city, whereupon the Prince gave a hand signal granting them permission to mount.

Right then, one of the plotters rushed the King, screaming at the top of his voice that he wished to hand H.M. a request. [‘]I am a poor and wretched soul,[’] he exclaimed. The entire retinue, which was some distance away, was unaware of the man’s criminal intentions. Instead, they admired the boldness with which he had approached H.M.’s horse and advanced their steeds to stop him. He then removed a pistol from his waistband and fired upon H.M., who, fortunately, was uninjured. A second Babi appeared and, like the first, shot at the King, but missed his mark thanks to the quick action of the King of Arms, who, grabbing the assassin by the arm and stabbing him with his sword, warded off the attack, with bullets flying over H.M.’s head. The attacker, realizing that his attempt had failed, still had the nerve to wield his sword and fling himself upon the Monarch attempting to wound him. Several members H.M.’s retinue hurled themselves at the ruffian and tore him to shreds in the King’s presence.

It was then that a third Babi ran hurriedly toward, and opened fire on, the Shah, who was injured slightly. Finally, the Kavasses captured the wretched plotters and took them to the city prison, where

they were interrogated about the motives behind so colossal a crime.”<sup>10</sup>

While the Spanish press was publishing news about the attempt against the Sháh, First Secretary of State Manuel Bertrán was receiving reports from the Spanish legation in Constantinople by way of a consular dispatch dated 24 September 1852 signed by José Nebiet.<sup>11</sup> The information contained in the dispatch is identical to that published by the *Journal de Constantinople* on 19 September. On 19 October, Manuel Bertrán made reply to the Minister Plenipotentiary of Spain in Turkey as follows:

Having conveyed to Our Lady the Queen the contents of H.M.’s dispatch no. 193, dated 24 September of the present year, pertaining to the attempt made against the Chah of Persia and the outbreak of cholera in Persia, Her Majesty acknowledges the news.

Thus Isabel II, Queen of Spain, was directly notified of the attempt against the Sháh and, as a result, of the Bábís’ existence.

Following the attempt on his life and the ensuing confusion, Náṣiri’d-Dín did not hesitate in taking action. Roused by his mother Mahd ‘Ulya, terrified at the prospect that the alleged Bábí conspiracy might have relied on the support of members of his court, and inflamed by his thirst for vengeance, the Sháh resolved to launch a campaign of persecution against the Bábís in Tehran. His I’timádu’d-Dawlih, Mírzá Naṣru’lláh-i-Núrí, also known as Mírzá Áqá Khán-i-Núrí,

took great pains to concoct a plan that would leave the Bábí community leaderless, test the loyalty of the Sháh's subjects, and, while at it, eradicate any possible doubts concerning his own allegiance to the monarch.

So began the hunt for any persons suspected of being Bábís. The prisoners were divided among assorted dignitaries and professional guilds in the capital, who would then arrange for their execution. In this manner they would demonstrate their loyalty to the monarch while sharing with him the burden of responsibility for the massacres. For months the streets of Tehran were the scene of grotesque exhibitions in which the Bábís were heinously martyred.

Several weeks after news about the attempt against the Sháh had broken, reports began circulating on the persecution of the Bábís. The following news item, initially published on 14 October by the *Journal de Constantinople*, appeared simultaneously in numerous European newspapers, among them several Spanish dailies:

PERSIA. A foreign daily offers some details concerning the execution of the conspirators in the plot to assassinate the Shah.

"From a dispatch from Tauris dated 27 September, which arrived yesterday from Trebisonda, we have received extremely important news from Persia. While disavowing the events in question, still we cannot remain silent in the face of the dispatch's contents.

The execution in Teheran of near-

ly 400 Babis, alleged coconspirators in the assassination attempt against the Shah of Persia, which we reported in a previous issue, has been carried out with extraordinary spectacle; it appears they have been subjected to the most extreme forms of torture. Sources maintain that the Shah has been gravely perturbed by the Bábís' attempt on his life."<sup>12</sup>

On 6 November, the Madrid daily *El Católico* published the following:

PERSIA. From Teheran we are receiving reports that the Babí sect, some of whose members had attempted to assassinate the Shah, continues to be persecuted in a manner that inspires horror. We already reported the day before on the mass execution by firing squad of 400 of its followers.

Other executions have followed. More recently, the Shah has banished his 13-year-old younger brother, Abbas Mírzá, expressly decreeing that he not return to Persia. Reports comment on how it was feared that he would order his execution, as it seems that Abbas Mirza is the protector of the Babis, who on repeated occasions have wanted to proclaim him king.<sup>13</sup> [sic]

Abbás Mírzá was the son of Muḥammad Sháh and one of his wives, Khadijah, and therefore Náṣiri'd-Dín's half brother. Though not himself a Bábí, his guardian, Siyyid Ḥusayn-i-Mutavallí-i-Qumí, was.<sup>14</sup> The plot against the Sháh of Persia not only provoked the attempted extermination of the Bábís, but also served as a pretext to purge all possible



pretenders to the king's throne. Linking the young prince to the Bábí Faith was probably the best justification he had for eliminating him.<sup>15</sup>

On 11 November 1852, several dailies published the following:

PERSIA

The letters and newspapers we are receiving from Teheran, dated 1 October, provide chilling details of the retributions being exacted in that city following the assassination attempt against the Shah by, as our readers are already aware, several followers of the Babi sect. During the inquest, the culprits, whether actual or alleged, refused to make any statement, and the court, therefore, was unable to ascertain any new facts other than that several persons had plotted the assassination. As a result, some were condemned to the galleys, others to death. The details from the daily official record on the manner of execution are so horrifying that our pen dares not describe them. Suffice it to say that the convicts were beaten senseless, then skinned alive, and finally hacked to death and quartered. Princes, high-ranking dignitaries, ministers, clergy, generals, even the meekest of the city's inhabitants, all had their share of the torture sessions and stained their hands with the victims' blood. The dead corpses were ripped to pieces at the hands of sabers, spears, mallet blows, and stoning of unbelievable ferocity. The barely recognizable remains resulting from such savage butchery were finally left to

hang on the city gates.<sup>16</sup> [sic]

The information provided by this news story was based on that published in the 27 August 1852 issue of *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-Ittifaqíyyih* concerning the first believers executed in connection with the attempt against the Sháh. It was also published, with some modifications as to length and content, in other European dailies. The article mentions how some of the culprits "were condemned to the galleys" instead of life in prison, as reported in the original account. This discrepancy might indicate that the text of the news story is a summary of J. B. Nicolas's translation of the account contained in the Persian official gazette, which his son published years later in *Siyyèd Ali Mohammed dit le Bab*, where the same discrepancy has been noted.<sup>17</sup>

Bahá'í bibliography covering this time frame traditionally ends the narrative concerning the persecutions of 1852 with Bahá'u'lláh's liberation from the Sáyáh-Chal and His subsequent banishment to Baghdad on 12 January 1853. The persecutions in Tehran, however, had not ceased; to the contrary, they would persist several months more. On 7 July 1853, *El Clamor Público* published the following:

PERSIA. The latest dispatches from Teheran, dated 30 May, report on the government's renewed harsh treatment of the Babis, a fanatical sect that has on several occasions attempted to assassinate the Shah. To dispel rumors of his death, the Monarch

rode through the capital accompanied by his ministers, his general staff, and his bodyguards. Any Bábís rounded up along the way were condemned on the spot to suffer cruel tortures, with nary a shred of evidence presented to prove their guilt.<sup>18</sup>

This news item is of great importance, for if it is true — and apparently there is no reason to doubt its authenticity — it indicates to us that the persecutions were ongoing even almost into June; moreover, it portrays a Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh who personally participated in and witnessed the punishments meted out against the Bábís. We will now devote a few paragraphs to the exact number of Bábís executed following the attempt against the Sháh.

While Shoghi Effendi characterizes the executions carried out in Tehran as “the darkest, bloodiest and most tragic episode of the Heroic Age of the Bahá’í Dispensation,”<sup>19</sup> some Bahá’í historical works published in the West, however, furnish lists of martyrs not exceeding forty-some names.<sup>20</sup> This apparent contradiction has been the object of criticism on the part of some authors.<sup>21</sup> Though determining the exact number of victims is impossible, the use of European historical sources could help us to fathom the actual extent of the persecutions of Tehran in 1852.

First, it must be pointed out that one of the sources used to calculate the number of martyrs in Tehran relies on the list published in the 27 August 1852 issue of the above-cited *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi’-i-*

*Ittifaqíyyih*, which contained only the names of those executed in the eleven days immediately following the assassination attempt. News published in various parts of Europe in late-October and early-November reporting that over 400 Bábís were executed is based on dispatches from Tabriz dated 27 September; that is, exactly one month after *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi’-i-Ittifaqíyyih* had published its list. Thus, in principle, no contradiction exists between the two accounts.

Additionally, *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi’-i-Ittifaqíyyih* includes only the names of adult males. We know of at least one woman killed at the time, however, and that is Ṭahirih, whose name does not figure in the above Persian newspaper’s list, although it does in several news stories published in Europe. We can credit Comte de Gobineau for an account describing the manner in which some Bábís were executed, and which demonstrates how women and children were also martyred, though their names had not been recorded:

The people saw marching, between executioners, children and women with deep holes cut into their flesh in which lighted wicks were inserted. The victims were dragged with ropes and goaded on with whips. Children and women went forth singing this verse: ‘In truth, we come from God and unto Him do we return.’ Their voices were raised triumphant above the deep silence of the crowd. . . . Some of the children expired on the way. The executioners would throw

their bodies under the feet of their fathers and sisters, who proudly walked over them without giving it a second thought. When the cortege reached the place of execution near the New Gate, the victims were given the choice between life and abjuration of their faith. . . . One of the executioners conceived the idea of saying to a father that, unless he yielded, he would cut the throats of his two sons on his very breast. The sons were quite young, the oldest about fourteen. Covered with blood, their flesh scorched, they were listening stoically to the threats. The father replied, while laying himself down, that he was ready and the older of the boys, claiming a prior right, requested to be the first to die.<sup>22</sup>

A document published by A. L. M. Nicolas provides another clue about the number of dead at the time. It is a letter from an eyewitness to the events, according to whom four hundred Bábís were arrested, three-fourths of them being divided up between assorted persons of prominence and officials overseeing their execution. His account mentions, in addition, killings and attacks perpetrated by the populace itself.<sup>23</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh Himself attests, further-

more, that during His imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál, which began sometime between 15 and 26 August and lasted about four months, executions were being carried out daily: "Every day Our gaolers, entering Our cell, would call the name of one of Our companions, bidding him arise and follow them to the foot of the gallows."<sup>24</sup>

Given the above, and going by the news published in Spain in July 1853, if we bear in mind that the persecutions continued at least until June of the same year, it would stand to reason that the number of Bábís murdered in Tehran exceeds the traditionally reported figures.

### Surveying the presence of Bábísm in the Spanish Vox Populi: 1850-1853

References found in the Spanish daily press of the 1850s could offer us, in addition to the particulars contained in the news stories themselves, information about the degree to which Spanish society then was familiar with the existence of Bábísm.

The following table shows the list of all of the total number of news stories, that we know of today, published in Spain during the period under consideration.

	Year/Title	City	Date
	<b>1850</b>		
1	<i>El Avisador Barcelonés</i>	Barcelona	6 November
2	<i>El Católico</i>	Madrid	24 October
3	<i>El Clamor Público</i>	Madrid	7 November
4	<i>La Esperanza</i>	Madrid	24 October
5			11 November
6	<i>La Nación</i>	Madrid	24 October
	<b>1852</b>		
7	<i>La Actualidad</i>	Barcelona	22 October

## Chronicles of a Birth

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8	<i>El Ancora</i>	Barcelona	13 October
9			15 November
10	<i>Correo de Barcelona</i>	Barcelona	12 October
11			4 November
12	<i>Diario de Barcelona</i>	Barcelona	13 October
13			5 November
14	<i>Diario de Cataluña</i>	Barcelona	11 October
15	<i>El Presente</i>	Barcelona	5 November
16	<i>El Católico</i>	Madrid	13 October
17			22 October
18			4 November
19			6-7 November
20			12 November
21			23 November
22	<i>El Clamor Público</i>	Madrid	13 October
23			4 November
24			11 November
25	<i>El Diario Español</i>	Madrid	14 October
26			4 November
27	<i>La Época</i>	Madrid	12 October
28	<i>La Esperanza</i>	Madrid	14 October
29			23 October
30			4 November
31			11 November
32			23 November
33	<i>La España</i>	Madrid	13 October
34			4 November
35	<i>La Gaceta Militar</i>	Madrid	26 October
36	<i>La Nación</i>	Madrid	13 October
37			4 November
38			6 November
39			27 November
40	<i>Las Novedades</i>	Madrid	14 October
41			5 November
42			13 November
43	<i>El Observador</i>	Madrid	13 October
44			4 November
45	<i>El Genio de la Libertad</i>	Palma de Mallorca	27 October
46			15 November
47		Valencia	7 November
	<b>1853</b>		
48	<i>El Católico</i>	Madrid	8 July
49	<i>El Clamor Público</i>	Madrid	7 July
50	<i>La Esperanza</i>	Madrid	7 July
51	<i>La Nación</i>	Madrid	8 July

The reader will glean that the majority of references were published in Madrid and Barcelona — the country's two largest cities — although others originate from medium-sized cities such as Valencia and Palma de Mallorca, as well as Vilanova i la Geltru, then a small municipality.

Although newspapers published in Barcelona were essentially distributed in Catalonia, those published in Madrid had subscribers throughout all of Spain and its collonies and therefore enjoyed wider circulation.<sup>25</sup>

It is possible to ascertain, with a reasonable margin of error, the total number of copies issued by each daily during the period in which it published stories making some reference to Bábism. With knowledge of the newspaper's number of pages, its size, and the postage paid by newspaper publishing houses then (information published regularly in the *State Official Gazette*), it is possible to estimate each paper's total print run. In other cases, it is possible to determine, on the basis of postal office records, the total number of each publication's subscribers.

Information thus obtained could give us a rough idea of the number of readers that might have learned about Bábism's existence from the daily press.

In the case of Barcelona, the median number of subscribers to newspapers making references to Bábism is as follows:<sup>26</sup>

1850	<i>El Avisador Barcelonés</i>	197
		<b>197</b>
1852	<i>Diario de Barcelona</i>	648
	<i>El Áncora</i>	388
	<i>El Barcelonés</i>	182
	<i>Diario de Cataluña</i>	181
	<i>El Correo de Barcelona</i>	126
	<i>El Presente</i>	90
	<i>La Actualidad</i>	60
		<b>1675</b>

We also have available numbers on the average print runs of some Madrid dailies. Thus we know, for example, that *Las Novedades*, Madrid's most widely circulated newspaper in the 1850s, printed on average 13,000 copies daily during 1852 and 1853.

In the near future, data on the number of copies in which information pertaining to Bábism in Persia was published in 1850, 1852, and 1853 will have been compiled, thereby making it possible to estimate the number of readers that potentially could have learned about the new religion. In the meantime, and on the basis of the data now at our disposal, we can speculate, for example, that news published in Madrid between October and November 1852 might have reached some 35,000 persons.

The persecutions carried out against the Bábís in Persia were the vehicle that helped to transport the name of the new Revelation to so distant a place as Spain. Such an accomplishment would not have come about as a result of the Bábís' own efforts. Not for nothing, above and beyond the sidelines of history, this

effect is the most visible and at the same time miraculous result of the persecutions attending all religions at their inception. "Behold how in this Dispensation," Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "the worthless and foolish have fondly imagined that by such instruments as massacre, plunder and banishment they can extinguish the Lamp which the Hand of Divine power hath lit, or eclipse the Day Star of everlasting splendor. How utterly unaware they seem to be of the truth that such adversity is the oil that feedeth the flame of this Lamp!"<sup>27</sup>

Little more than a decade later, with the publication in France of Comte de Gobineau's *Les Religions et Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*, did the Spanish public — above all, its intellectual circles — have the opportunity to learn in greater depth about the religious movement that years earlier had captured the headlines. The Báb's biography and teachings; events such as those taking place at Shaykh Ṭabarsí; and figures such as Ṭahirih, Quddús, and Mullá Ḥusayn; as depicted by Gobineau's pen, motivated some Spaniards to mention and spread anew the existence of Bábism in their writings. We will explore these in greater detail on a future occasion.

## Notes

\* The author is indebted to Mr. Francisco Díaz for his excellent rendering from Spanish into English of this article.

1. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, *Proceedings of the Dedication of the Chair in Bahá'í Studies*, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 8.
2. Year in which the Bahá'í Faith was official-

ly established in Spain.

3. *Gazzeta Ufficiale di Venezia*, 14 September 1850.
4. Sheil describes the episode as follows:

*A struggle between the government and the priesthood relative to the right of asylum in shrines, mosques, and other places of sanctity, has been long going on; one party seeking its overthrow, the other its maintenance for the preservation of their own influence over the people. Intelligence has just arrived from Tabreez [sic] of an extraordinary device adopted by the moollas of that city for restoring the right of bast, or sanctuary, to its ancient vigour. A cow being conducted to the slaughterhouse, in passing by a noted shrine in the middle of the city, twice took refuge in the holy spot. On the third repetition of the disregard of this appeal to the power of the defunct saint, the butcher was struck dead. How this portion of the miracle was effected I know not. The news spread in a moment through the city, and all the zeal of the Moslems was roused. In general it finds a vent in the pillage of the Armenians or the Jews; but on this occasion it took a different direction. Miracles in abundance were performed. The blind saw, the lame walked, maladies innumerable were healed. A pitch of enthusiasm was raised which was described to be "frightful" illuminations on an unheard-of scale took place during three successive nights; the shrine was exalted into an inviolable sanctuary, and gamblers and drunkards who should dishonour its precincts were to be slain. But the government was strong in the hands of the Ameer e Nizam, the Prime Minister. I may as well now anticipate events, and mention that, before many months had elapsed, some of the principal instigators of these prodigies were brought to Tehran, where they remained in much discomfort, and were only released on promising to work no more miracles.*

Sheil, Mary. *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*. London: John Murray, 1856. pp. 165-166.

5. The same information was published with minor variations in two Madrid journals: *El Clamor Público*, on 7 November, and *La Esperanza*, on 11 November.
6. Gobineau, Comte M. A., "Les Religions et

Philosophies dans l’Asie Centrale.” In *Translation of French Foot-notes of The Dawn-Breakers*, Emily McBride Perigord. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996.

7. *From the facts that Bábism [sic] in its earliest years found itself in conflict with the civil powers, and that an attempt was made by Bábis [sic] upon the life of the Sháh, it has been wrongly inferred that the movement was political in origin and Nihilist in character. It does not appear from a study of the writings either of the Báb or his successors, that there is any foundation for such a suspicion. The persecution of the government very early drove the adherents of the new creed into an attitude of rebellion; and in the exasperation produced by the struggle, and by the ferocious brutality with which the rights of conquest were exercised by the victors, it was not surprising if fanatical hands were found ready to strike the sovereign down. At the present time the Bábis are equally loyal with any other subjects of the Crown.*  
Lord Curzon, “Persia and the Persian Question,” quoted in Nabil-i-A’zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1970.
8. *El Diario Catalán* (Barcelona), 11 October 1852, p. 1310.
9. *El Diario Español* (Madrid), 14 October 1852, p. 2.
10. *La Actualidad* (Barcelona), 22 October 1852, p. 3.
11. When this communication was written, the Spanish legation in Constantinople was composed of: José Nebiet (Acting Minister Plenipotentiary), Manuel de Castillo y Rivadeneyra (Secretary), Bernardo de Souza (First Interpreter), Francisco Radovani (Second Interpreter), Salvador Rizo (Translator’s Apprentice).
12. *La Nación* (Madrid), 4 November 1852, p. 3.
13. *El Católico* (Madrid), 6 November 1852, p. 3 (1275).
14. The earliest accounts we have about Siyyid Husayn-i-Mutavalli-i-Qumí place him at the Fort of Shaykh Ṭabarsí. There

he betrayed Quddús and his companions. Following the attempt on the Sháh’s life, he was imprisoned together with other Bábís and Bahá’u’lláh in the Síyáh-Chál (see Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 384, 398, and 632). He was deported, along with ‘Abbás Mírzá, to Baghdad, where he eventually aligned himself with the Azalís. In Baghdad, Bahá’u’lláh revealed the Shikkar-Shikan-Shavand for him. See Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, Vol. I, pp. 147-151.

15. On the relationship between Naṣiri’d-Dín and ‘Abbás Mírzá before and after the attempt on the life of the Sháh, see Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, pp. 138-142 and 219-222.
16. *La Esperanza* (Madrid), 11 November 1852, pp. 1-2.
17. See Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*, George Ronald: Oxford, 1981, pp. 138-142.
18. *El Clamor Público* (Madrid), 7 July 1853, p. 3. Similar news was published a few months later on September 1853 in several Italian journals.
19. *Messages to the Bahá’í World*, p. 39.
20. See, for instance, Nabil’s *The Dawn-Breakers* and Balyuzi’s *Bahá’u’lláh: The King of Glory*.
21. I am referring to Denis MacEoin’s article titled “From Babism to Baha’ism: Problems of Militancy, Quietism, and Conflation in the Construction of a Religion,” originally published in *Religion*, Vol. 13 (1983): 219-55, and which can be downloaded at [bahai-library.org/articles/babism.maceoin.html](http://bahai-library.org/articles/babism.maceoin.html)
22. Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 612.
23. Letter of prince Kemal-u-Dín Hindustani included in A. L. M. Nicolas’s *Massacres de Babis en Perse*, Adrien-Maisonneuve: Paris. 1936. pp. 35-42.
24. Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 632-3.
25. Thus, for example, Madrid newspapers would sell approximately 34,552 copies in

- 1852, 48,738 in 1852, and 51,048 in 1853 to the rest of Spain (including the Philippines and the Antilles). See Cabrera, Elorza, Valero y Vázquez, *Datos para un estudio cuantitativo de la prensa diaria madrileña* (1850-1875) in *Prensa y Sociedad en España* (1820-1936), Edicusa, Madrid, 1975, M. Tuñón de Lara, A. Elorza, and M. Pérez Ledesma, Eds.
26. Martí Casimir, "L'Església de Barcelona 1850-1857," in *200 anys de Premsa Diària a Catalunya*, Barcelona: Fundació Caixa de Catalunya, 1995.
27. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), sec. 29, p. 72.



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# Unity and Progressive Revelation:

## Comparing Bahá'í Principles with the Basic Concepts of Teilhard de Chardin

Wolfgang A. Klebel

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### A. Introduction

In the year 1949, less than a decade before the death of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and before the posthumous publication of his books, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith,<sup>1</sup> wrote these words:

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. But we know that

the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly.<sup>2</sup>

What is the meaning of this statement of the Guardian, claiming that the thinking world has caught up with the Bahá'í principles during the last 70 years? What are the dynamics of this process and what can we expect to find, when scrutinizing the "thinking world" after the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? Today the Bahá'í Faith has a history of over a century and there

are many indications that the principles of the Bahá'í Revelation have influenced this world, even beyond the influence of the Bahá'í community as such.

The catching up of the “thinking world” with the Bahá'í Principles, as pointed out by Shoghi Effendi, will be the point of comparison of this paper, which attempts to “correlate with the Bahá'í teachings” the corresponding concepts of Teilhard de Chardin, whose books created a sensation in European intellectual circles when they were first published. This correlation will allow a comparison of the Faith with the “progressive movements of today” and promote the study of the “Bahá'í teachings more deeply.”<sup>3</sup>

Why, we may ask, is this paper introducing Teilhard de Chardin as a representative of the “thinking world” into this comparison, why is Teilhard introduced into this dialogue between the Bahá'í Faith and the progressive movements of today? Norman L. Geisler in his foreword to David H. Lane's *The Phenomenon of Teilhard: Prophet for a New Age*,<sup>4</sup> has said the following:

New Age writer of the popular Aquarian Conspiracy Marilyn Ferguson observed that many of the leading lights of the New Age movement claim Teilhard as one of the most influential persons in their lives. Other influences acknowledged include C. G. Jung, Aldous Huxley, Swami Muktananda, Thomas Merton, Werner Erhard, and Maharishi Yogi. Indeed, of the 185 New Age leaders surveyed, Teilhard was the most frequently mentioned of any

person who had most influenced their thinking. If this is the case, then if we are to understand the New Age movement properly it behooves us to take a careful and critical look at Teilhard de Chardin.

David H. Lane further claims that “today, within the Roman Catholic Church in most parts of Europe and America, Teilhardism is the dominant trend. Teilhard is referred to with adulation by many of the ‘progressive’ within the church.”<sup>5</sup>

Wolfgang Smith in his book *Teilhardism and the New Religion* remarks:

Christianity (as personified, firstly, by major contingents of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, and secondly, by a number of Protestant and inter-denominational institutions, such as the World Council of Churches) has begun to turn in the direction mapped out by Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>6</sup>

It has to be noted that these books claim to prove that Teilhardism is untrue and contrary to the Christian message. However, they present the system of Teilhard quite well, and critique it from a conservative, traditional and often fundamentalist Christian point of view, which cumulates in the statement of Rama Coomaraswamy: “The Truth, being timeless and immutable, is clearly immune from such ‘forces of change.’”<sup>7</sup> This understanding of the truth would equally conflict with Shoghi Effendi's understanding, when he says for example:

The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh<sup>8</sup> . . . is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony.<sup>9</sup>

New Age writers and readers, progressive Catholics and Protestants alike, are all looking for new forms of religion, they are looking for something new in the meaning and understanding of today's world. They are the people described by Karen Armstrong in the last sentence of her book about the *History of God*:<sup>10</sup>

Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.

Can man create a new faith? Try as they might, they will end up with something like the New Age faith, or, even worse, with the faith of ideologies that have characterized the last century<sup>11</sup> and brought destruction, death and misery to the whole world.<sup>12</sup> This paper is written to investigate a new faith, i.e. the Bahá'í Faith, and the comparison with Teilhard is not intended to be a proof of the truth of this Faith, but could hopefully provide a bridge from modern and post modern thinking to this Faith.

As will be shown below, it is significant that Teilhard de Chardin's ideas have been misunderstood in a similar way than the principles of the Bahá'í Faith. Such misunderstood ideas, among others, are the globalization of this world and world unity, the relativity of truth and the progressiveness of Revelation, the concept of unity in diversity and the harmony between science and religion, between reason and theology.

Teilhard attempted to "integrate pure scientific research with a religious vocation" and tried "to reconstruct science from the perspective of faith."<sup>13</sup> His books were perceived by the Vatican as a threat to the integrity of the Faith. While "a small number of world-class scientists have taken his ideas seriously . . . the majority of scientists have reacted as defensively as the Vatican theologians."<sup>14</sup> As can be seen, Teilhard was critically evaluated and equally rejected by both sides, by traditional Christian theologians and by traditional scientists.

In what way can the developments in the "thinking world" be seen as caused by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh or as caused by other social dynamics? This is a question for which there is no simple answer, it depends on the worldview of the observer. Even the scientific methodology cannot answer these questions, because history, unlike the natural sciences, does not allow experiments, to prove a causal connection. We can show antecedents and consequences, but the connection between them is, by definition, beyond scientific proof. Therefore, any understanding presented is always

speculative, based on historical facts. The proof of a speculation is in its predictive value, or in its historical results, which again are based more on the way the investigator looks at his data than on any scientific proof.

For example, as a scientific hypothesis we could ask the question: is the Marxist theory of the development of society true or false? Before the breakdown of Marxism as a viable social philosophy, this question would have been answered differently, depending on the worldview of the observer. Today, there is no question that the system did not work in the long run, and even former Marxists will have to admit that. Nevertheless, the failure of that system can again be attributed to different causes, maybe it was not implemented properly, maybe the respective societies were not ready, or maybe the system is just plain wrong and cannot work. All historical analyses are bound by similar limits.

When asking about the influence of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, it is again in the eyes of the beholder, what we see. Sometimes, it appears that a historical finding can shed a closer light on this problem. As will be shown in this paper, when a scientist-philosopher, Teilhard, who has no knowledge of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, comes to conclusions surprisingly similar with this Revelation, one could assume that there is something happening beyond natural and scientifically provable causes. Nevertheless, it could be stated as well, that both these elements are caused by a natural and not religious source, and consequently the outcome

appears similar. And there is no doubt that this will be stated by historians who have the methodological assumption that all effects are due to natural causes.<sup>15</sup> That means if you definitely exclude anything else but natural causes, you will not see anything else. In addition, how do we define here natural versus spiritual or religious, or supernatural causes? These three terms are commonly used interchangeably, but they have different meanings according to the respective theological or philosophical system in which they are used.

In this context Teilhard stated: "However, it is just at this point, in fact, that we meet an initial split in the thinking mass of mankind." And further:

Beneath an infinite number of secondary differentiation, caused by the diversity of social interests, of scientific investigation or religious faith, there are basically two types of minds, and only two: those who do not go beyond (and see no need to go beyond) perception of the multiple – however interlinked in itself the multiple may appear to be – and those for whom perception of this same multiple is necessarily completed in some unity. There are only, in fact, pluralists and monists: those who do not see, and those who do.<sup>16</sup>

The investigation presented in this paper is clearly based on what Teilhard calls monistic understanding or, as we would prefer to say, universalistic understanding or integral vision,<sup>17</sup> on seeing the whole and not only parts, on seeing the unity of the world and not only the plu-

rality of events; and in this point again, Bahá'í thinking<sup>18</sup> and the thinking of Teilhard are akin. This correspondence is one of the findings of this paper, described further below. Consequently, when in this paper the unity principle is the basis of understanding and its method, this cannot be proven to pluralistic thinkers, but neither can they prove this way of monistic thinking wrong, except when they unscientifically take their pluralistic and materialist assumptions as scientific truth, beyond proof. By definition, there is no scientific process that can prove either side as true or false.

Teilhard de Chardin was chosen for this investigation as representing the progressive movements of today. Though written in the first half of the last century, Teilhard's works have a rather significant following today. It has been shown that he is the most quoted author in the writings of the "New Age" literature and does seem to attract many seeking souls of today.<sup>19</sup> In addition there is a rather significant influence of his thinking in today's discussion of religion and of the future of the world, which makes him an author whose importance might be rising, rather than diminishing. There are a number of books available about him and his books are available in new editions.

The following chapters will describe the method of investigation used in this paper, will compare the Bahá'í principles with basic concepts of Teilhard's writing, and will explain how they differ and why and how they function in the given context in a corresponding fashion.

### B. Unity Method of Investigation

A word here about the method of this investigation. William S. Hatcher writes;

In particular, the refusal of many practicing scientists to give serious attention to fundamental philosophical and metaphysical questions has undoubtedly retarded development of science itself as well as creating an intellectual milieu in which immoral and anti-social uses of science and technology are more easily accepted both by the public and by the intellectuals.<sup>20</sup>

The fundamental philosophical questions as expressed by Teilhard are the way of looking at this world, from a monistic or universal and spiritual point of view or from a pluralistic and materialistic point. These different points of view obviously influence the methodology of any investigation, which will result in different findings of the inquiry.

The correspondence between the Teilhardian and the Bahá'í thinking will determine the method of this investigation, because any method has to be appropriately adjusted to the topic of the investigation. Following the above mentioned characteristic of a monistic or universalistic point of view, this investigation will keep the unity of the investigated topic in focus and in this process this approach will be verified and demonstrated. This circular way of thinking, i.e. to prove a method while applying it, and then again concluding back from the result of the investigation

to the justification of the method, which had made the findings possible, seems to be required whenever the investigation surpasses a simple counting and describing of elements and their material causation.

This approach appears to be necessary and uniquely justified whenever the meaning and higher level of understanding, in other words the spiritual, is focused upon. We have to keep in mind that basic assumptions of any investigation are never proven, they are applied and prove or disprove themselves during the process of application.

In other words, the method of investigation is not determined by detecting causes and effects in a materialistic and physical sense, but by finding the meaning of the elements or parts in the respective whole. For example the tax on tea was not the cause of the American Revolution in the same sense that the legal rule of taxation is the cause of government money or as a virus is the cause of an illness – and even there are several other causes involved, because not everyone exposed gets every illness. The tax on tea was only one elements or historical fact, which in the understanding of the colonials became meaningful and an element in the forthcoming revolution. The tea leaves in the Boston harbor did not cause anything, except maybe stomach problems for the fish population. But the meaning of the act of protest in the whole self awareness of the colonists was creat-

ing a new meaning and only in this sense a “cause” for rebellion and war.<sup>21</sup>

This investigation will, in a modest way, follow the method which can be called “ganzheitlich,” or “integral,” i.e. based on the “wholeness” of being. It proceeds in three steps, indicated by the level of inquiry as presented in the following scheme:<sup>22</sup>

Level of Inquiry	Description of Inquiry	Example
Level I Text	Key texts form Bahá’í and Teilhard; Issues of translation, terminology	Attraction - Love; Unity-Wholeness; Reason - Spirit
Level II Context in Parts	Relationship compared in systems on the level of elements, parts, plurality	Unity in gender, religion, and peoples of the earth
Level III Context in Wholeness / Unity	Relationship of the Parts and the Whole (Teil und Ganzes), Holon Teilhard: Unification and evolution; Bahá’í: Unity and progressive revelation; The world as a Whole	Vienna school of thought: Spann, Gabriel (Solov’ev), Wucherer-Huldenfeld; <sup>23</sup> The “Integral Whole” and in USA more recently Ken Wilber’s “Integral Vision” <sup>24</sup>

If the wholeness, the Unity of being, is the guiding principle of the investigation then these three steps are consistent with such an investigation and can be applied in any inquiry comparing such systems to each other.

## Comparison of Bahá'í Principles with Teilhard's basic concepts

In the following comparison only short passages from the Bahá'í and Teilhardian texts will be quoted and a referral to the Appendix will indicate the context and the quote of these sections. The number of comparison and the letter of the text will indicate the context and the source of the quote. (For example 1a indicates the appendix 1 and the text under a.) In the spirit of independent investigation, which is a Bahá'í principle as well, the interested reader is invited to read the texts independently from the interpretation of this writer and come to her own conclusions. A comparison of the reader's own conclusion with the findings of this article could be a most valuable improvement on this paper.

It has to be considered that the writings being compared were not only originally presented in different languages, but also in different theological, philosophical, and metaphysical systems of understanding. While both texts are here quoted in their English translation, the theological, philosophical, and metaphysical context requires a consideration of norms of translation as well, which is attempted in this paper and needs further study.<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted that the selection of texts is certainly not comprehensive and exhaustive, it is intended to give credence to the interpretations presented in this paper and to stimulate further readings.

## Comparison 1 (cf. texts in Appendix 1)

Bahá'í: Unity in diversity

Teilhard: Unity and multiplicity,  
the one and the many

On the issue of philosophical translation, we have to note that the term "diversity" or its French equivalent is not a term used by Teilhard. Teilhard usually talks about unity and wholeness and multiplicity, or plurality and complexity. The Bahá'í Writings present the future development of the world as unity in diversity (1a,b,c).<sup>26</sup> Teilhard is interested in the physical and spiritual relationships of unity and diversity and how they relate to each other (1f,g).<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, in the chosen excerpts the corresponding term for diversity is plurality, multiplicity, and even fragmentation (1e). Complexity is also used as a central description of the fact that unity and diversity (or complexity) increase together, not in opposition to each other. So we can state that an increase in complexity and multiplicity will demand a higher level of unity. The Bahá'í "watchword" of "unity in diversity" (1c) does not analyze the relationship of these two concepts but uses them together, indicating, in a similar way, that they are complementary and not contradictory concepts, in the same way as Teilhard understood the concept of unity and plurality or multiplicity.

Teilhard sees the world as a world in evolution and therefore explains that the one and the multiple are not opposed to each other; actually he states that the one is born from the multiple and the unity is



woven from the plurality in a synthesis (1i). Teilhard presents the discourse of the complementary relationship between the one and the many, between the whole and its parts and between the unity and diversity. This philosophical topic of the whole (“das Ganze”) and its parts was further developed by Leo Gabriel and by Wucherer-Huldenfeld<sup>28</sup> in the concept of the integral whole.

A more recent development of the concept of the integral whole is presented by Ken Wilber, who uses the concept of Holon to indicate that each whole is actually composed of many parts, as well as being itself a part in a greater whole. This holistic process is described as a fundamental principle of all reality, from subatomic particles, to atoms, to molecules, to cells, to organisms, and humans, continuing into the awareness of humans, forming different levels of holons even there. So what is a part on one level of being is a whole on a lower level, and constitutes with other parts a whole on the next higher level.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Wilber concludes “Reality as a whole is not composed of things or processes, but of holons. Composed, that is, of wholes that are simultaneously parts of other wholes, with no upward or downward limit.”<sup>30</sup> While more explicit, Wilber follows in that matter Teilhard and Koestler.<sup>31</sup>

Summarizing the new literature about this issue it can be stated that unity and multiplicity are concepts that are used not only in the relationship between the whole and the parts, but also in the relationship between the parts related to each other (1g). We can speak of an increasing-

ly higher level of unity, Teilhard begins with the atom or subatomic particle and develops this throughout the universe. The increasing unity and increasing complexity of the elements or parts indicates the increasing level of these elements in the whole of the cosmos, which he describes as cosmogenesis, indicating that this relationship is on the basis of the evolution of the world. Studying the phenomenon of man, Teilhard sees in human development the apex of this evolution and anticipates an even higher level of unity in the future evolution of the world, for which he coins the word “anthropogenesis” (1g).

The Bahá’í concept of unity in diversity is a basic idea that includes the development of the whole world community and it is aptly described by Shoghi Effendi as a unity that does not suppress the elements by which it is constituted, such as ethnicity, climate, language, and traditions, which all constitute this unity (1c). Before this, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá anticipated the Bahá’í community to “offer to the entire world a vibrant model of unity in diversity” (1b). Bahá’u’lláh laid the groundwork for this development, when He called humankind to purge the vision of men and to perceive this “unity in diversity, of variation and oneness, of limitation and detachment” stating that this will “wing our flight unto the highest and innermost sanctuary of the inner meaning of the Word of God,” thus connecting the vision of this new unity of the world with His Revelations (1a).

It needs to be noted that the term “unity” is not a univocal concept. This

becomes immediately clear when it is applied to different levels of existence. First of all, when we speak of the unity, or oneness of God, we only mean that there is only one God, and as much as this term is used in the Bahá'í writings, Bahá'u'lláh has the following to say about it:

*And if I attempt to describe Thee by glorifying the oneness of Thy Being, I soon realize that such a conception is but a notion, which mine own fancy has woven and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted above the vain imaginations, which the hearts of men have devised.*<sup>32</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh stresses the unity of all the Manifestations, but this does not imply a sameness of the human aspect or station of the Manifestation. This is clearly expressed in the Bible, where Christ indicates that John the Baptist is the return of Elias, even though no human identity is assumed and the Baptist could justifiably deny such identity.<sup>33</sup> In the same sense every Manifestation is the return of all the prior Manifestations, a unity in the Divine Station or Spirit, yet all different in Their historical and human shape.

When we speak of the unity of mankind, we talk about something different again, we talk about a unity that is based on a plurality, and we talk about a unity in diversity. The unity of an organism, such as a human being, needs to be applied in an analogous manner, but is different from the unity of humanity.

Teilhard, in his book *The Phenomenon*

*of Man*, has developed a vision of the whole world not only in evolution but also in unification, in wholeness, which he calls unimpeachable and describes as a "system by its plurality, a totum by its unity, a quantum by its energy; all three within a boundless contour" (1e). At this point the ontological placement of Teilhardian thinking needs to be noted. Wucherer-Huldenfeld has not only clarified the ontological roots in the Scholastic tradition of Teilhard's thinking but has additionally explained that this thinking is based on the unity of matter and spirit, of unity and diversity, and in this understanding it is especially important to note that these concepts describe the reality of the cosmos in which these seemingly contradictory concepts are not opposed to each other, but dependent on each other. Therefore, Teilhard frequently remarks that unification does at the same time differentiate the parts, so the parts and the whole are in an integral relationship, where the increase of unity requires an increase of diversity.<sup>34</sup>

In concluding, it can be stated that the Teilhardian concept of the whole and its parts is not only congruent with the Bahá'í watchword of unity in diversity, but can provide an understanding of this watchword in modern thinking. A solid understanding of the Teilhardian concept of unification is not only comparable with the Bahá'í thinking about wholeness and unity, it adds understanding and conceptual assistance to the Bahá'í teachings and allows the Bahá'í scholar to grasp the Bahá'í concept of unity in diversity

“more deeply.”<sup>35</sup>

**Comparison 2 (cf. texts in Appendix 2)**

Bahá’í: Independent Investigation

Teilhard: Our age an age of science

Again we have to consider that the concepts used by Teilhard are not directly translatable into Bahá’í concepts. The Bahá’í Writings are theological and revelatory texts. Teilhard, who was no stranger to theology and revelation, clearly states that his investigation of man and of the universe is not based on theology — he describes it as purely and simply a scientific treatise (2e). When he concludes that truth is nothing other than the total coherence of the universe, he makes, in his understanding, a scientific statement (2e). The same is true when Teilhard declares that the truth of the human being is the truth of the universe (2f). Teilhard even acknowledges that this understanding of truth is a new thing, is something enormous and something the universe has given birth to in our times of scientific research (2g).

The text from Bahá’u’lláh states the same facts in theological language; “Looking and pondering” at the “world” will make the world “unveil” itself before “thine eyes” and will “reveal what God has inscribed in it.” It will give you “clear explanations” and make you “independent” from other opinions (cf. 2a). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in interpreting Bahá’u’lláh’s words adds the social benefit of this approach, stating “once every soul inquireth into truth, society will be freed from darkness of continually repeating the past” (2b). The independent investiga-

tion of reality (or truth, as stated in other passages) is one of the Bahá’í principles stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (2c). Teilhard has understood this unity of the truth and the need, or as he would claim, the modern obsession with investigating it. In another statement, Teilhard directly called this attitude of science and this need to understand the truth of this world the new “religion of evolution” and an experience of conversion that encompasses all thinking people today.<sup>36</sup>

The understanding of reality, the looking and pondering at the world, reveals to humankind the truth, which God has inscribed into the world. God has given man the ability to investigate this truth. Teilhard seems to be a witness to this ability and he found the vestiges of the truth of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh in investigating this world, commensurate to his capacity. This development could be demonstrated in many other philosophers and scientists, Teilhard (2g) seems only to be an outstanding example of this recognition of the truth from scientifically studying this world today. It is important that only in a view that looks at the whole, looks at the universe as a “Ganzheit,” an integral whole, this vision will emerge, reinforcing the Bahá’í understanding of the unity of the world.

In his writings about unification and the whole and its part, Teilhard has presented his worldview under the concept of evolution or progress. This new understanding of history has to be investigated in the next section in order to understand the congruence of these two approaches better. The human reason, or ability to

understand the world as a whole, is seen here as a special ability that is the basis of scientific progress. The relationship between reason and reality, the ability of humankind to understand the world and the relations of its parts to each other and to the whole, is the aspect considered by Teilhard in his writings.

How science as a human capacity relates to the object of scientific study is a question of fundamental importance. Ashbrook and Albright in their book *The Humanizing Brain, Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*,<sup>37</sup> express similar thoughts when they say:

In understanding the brain, we seekers may come to understand how we become the human beings that we are — our genetic inheritance, our cultural variations, and our divine destiny.<sup>38</sup>

They further claim in the same venue: “God is the ‘self evident’ and ‘dynamic source’ of all reality as experienced and expressed by human beings.” They discuss the attempted creation of God in the human image by the thinkers of Enlightenment, from Newton, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche and conclude:

Today, postmodern perspectives remind us of the constraint of context, the pluralisms of perspectives, and the constructions of the mind. Even though, all theories of projection must account for that screen upon which the projection is directed. Meaning embraces meaning making as well as meaning discovery!<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion it can be recognized that the Bahá’í principle of “independent investigation of the truth” is not only a personal challenge to all people of today, it is also a mandate towards the scientific enterprise of the future. It is not only the individual person who is obligated to investigate the truth; it is also, in Teilhard’s words, an obligation towards the “patient, prosaic, but cumulative work of scientists of all kind” (2h). Teilhard even states that “the universe, in its totality and unity, inexorably forces itself on our attention.” And he describes this situation “to be a burden to us, to fascinate us, to exalt us” (2h).

Bahá’u’lláh has stated of His revelation: “The universe is pregnant with these manifold bounties, awaiting the hour when the effects of its unseen gifts will be made manifest in this world.”<sup>40</sup> Believing in this statement, should we not recognize the birth of this new understanding? Should we not perceive the offering of the manifold bounties of the Manifestation of God in the progress of science and investigation? It appears to me that Teilhard has aptly gleaned the fascination as well as the burden and obligation of this nascent worldview; we all, individually and cumulatively, in our personal lives and in our scientific enterprises are compelled to seek, in acceptance of the principle of the independent investigation of truth.

### Comparison 3 (cf. texts in Appendix 3)

Bahá’í: Progressive Revelation,  
Harmony of Science, Religion

Teilhard: “God of Evolution,” “Christ the Evolver,” “Cosmic Christ”

In this comparison we again encounter the need to use the concept of translation norms and we will see how initial distinction of the process will result in the unity of the findings. The Bahá'í Writings, as quoted, talk about progressive revelation, while Teilhard speaks about evolution and the development of the cosmos, from the atom to the human, as a scientific concept. Additionally, he himself integrates or synthesizes this evolution of the cosmos with the physical concept of the point Omega and the theological concept of the Eternal or Cosmic Christ (3h). The translation in this case will be to extrapolate the biblical, mostly Pauline concept of the Cosmic Christ into the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation. Later on, we will exemplify this translation in the Return of Christ from a Bahá'í and Teilhardian perspective as well. Here it has to be explained why world evolution is comparable with progressive Revelation.

While Teilhard envisions the Eternal Christ as the cause and motor of the progress of the world to the point Omega and calls him the Christ of Evolution, he is painfully aware that a new perception and understanding of the Christian message is required to be effective in this context of our time. So he states:

The fact is that Christianity has already been in existence for two thousand years, and the time has come (as it does for every other physical reality) when it needs to be rejuvenated by an injection of new elements.

(cf. Appendix 6e,f, quoted from 6g)

These needed new elements are expressed in the new understanding of the Christian message in the light of evolution, which is at the core of Teilhard's worldview.

The Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation has to be seen in a twofold manner. From the perspective of the world the revelation is aptly described as progressive; from the perspective of the Unity of the Divine Manifestations it is better described as successive, because there is no progressive difference from one Manifestation to the next, except in the form the Manifestations reveal Themselves to humankind. Any progress from one Revelation to the next is, therefore, a function of the recipients of the Revelation, on which the appearance of the Revelation depends, in order to be understood. Consequently, the progressiveness of the successive Revelations is totally dependent on the progress of humanity, which is the addressee of every new Revelation.

Bahá'u'lláh, therefore, uses these terms interchangeably in the original language. The distinction occurs in the English translation by Shoghi Effendi,<sup>41</sup> according to the context, as in the following passage:

*Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestation of Adam with that of the Báb. I testify before God that each one of these Manifestations hath been sent down through the operation of the Divine Will and Purpose, that each hath been the bearer of a*

*specific Message, that each hath been entrusted with a divinely-revealed Book and been commissioned to unravel the mysteries of a mighty Tablet. The measure of the Revelation with which every one of them hath been identified had been definitely foreordained. This, verily, is a token of Our favor unto them, if ye be of those that comprehend this truth. . . . And when this process of progressive Revelation culminated in the stage at which His peerless, His most sacred, and exalted Countenance was to be unveiled to men's eyes, He chose to hide His own Self behind a thousand veils, lest profane and mortal eyes discover His glory.*<sup>42</sup> [emphases added]

Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that the progress of the world is a “principle and ordinance of God” (3a). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, His interpreter in the Bahá’í Faith, further develops this thought. Vividly He describes the divine institution of religion as a dynamic, evolutionary concept and includes into this evolution of the “divine reality” all the human achievements of this “century of life and renewal” in “science, art, industry, and inventions” (3b). This compares directly with the statement of Teilhard that the universe has been appreciated “as an organic whole, advancing towards an every higher degree of freedom and personality” (3f). Teilhard concludes correctly, without being able to appreciate the prophetic character of his enunciation, that humanity needs and wants this new form of religion (3f and 3g). He explored

the evolution of the cosmos from a scientific point of view in his book *The Phenomenon of Man* and then, in a theological reflection, he placed the universal and cosmic Christ (using Pauline formulations) at the same point Omega, which he had scientifically anticipated (3h).

This seems to be a mysterious coincidence, or an indication that the Bahá’í Revelation is influencing the development of human thought. Teilhard, coming from the scientific perspective, ends up with the same conclusions, which before him were clearly expressed in the Bahá’í writings, originating from the Revelation of the Prophet of God. A more evident, astounding, and unanticipated result of these two lines of investigation can hardly be found.

There is commonality in the approach of those two lines of thinking; they both start with the unity and wholeness of the world of man and of the cosmos. While Teilhard expresses himself in a scientific manner, his basic understanding of the meaning of the world is religious, is formulated in the tradition of the Catholic Church following the Gospel of Christ. We can consequently compare the materialistic and reductionistic philosophical background of modern science on the one hand, with the fundamentalist, literal, and legalistic tradition of Christianity, as expressed in protestant denominations and in the Catholic Church, on the other. It might well be that historically these two traditions were not developed independently from each other, but rather demonstrate that the religious misconstruction of reality

has resulted in an opposing development of science, which inadvertently has not solved the problem, but participated in the same problem as its point of departure.

So we could suspect that the materialistic orientation of modern science was developed in opposition to a similar, mainly legalistic, and repressive understanding of Christianity, but has not shed the common misunderstanding of reality. The spiritual sins of the fathers were crippling the scientific attempts of the children. It could be speculated that the rapid increase in scientific progress and findings in the last century might indicate that these problems are being solved and we could further suspect and venture the thought that this has something to do with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, since that progress of science was predicted by Him.

The rejection of Teilhard's thinking by both sides of this divide should not surprise us. As Teilhard says, "There are only, in fact, pluralists and monists: those who do not see, and those who do."<sup>43</sup> We can further conclude from this finding that there will never be harmony between the reductionistic and materialistic understanding of science, as well as between the repressive and legalistic misunderstanding of the message of Christ as presented in traditional Christian theology on the one hand, and the Bahá'í Faith on the other. It is the concept of Unity that harmonizes religion and science; it is again the concept of the Whole, or the Unity of God's Revelation in all religions, which will bring harmony and unity to the

different religions of the earth.

It is clear that Teilhard was keenly aware that the world is not static or without evolution, as appears to be the standard Christian doctrine (3e). When the history of the world is reduced to the salvation of individual souls, any evolution of the universe is of little or no importance. Teilhard came to the conclusion that human progress is of little importance to Christians within that worldview. Among others, that is the same difficulty Teilhard's Christian critics express clearly today.<sup>44</sup> The fact that this understanding is particular to Western Christianity, and especially developed in the Protestant denominations, as well as in different form in the Catholic Church, will not further be pursued here.<sup>45</sup>

In concluding, it can be stated that the Teilhardian approach originated in a scientific treatise and developed into the scientific understanding of the progressive nature of the cosmos, so that Teilhard finally could harmonize this idea with religion in the theological concept of the Cosmic Christ. This scientific process is a parallel to the kerygmatic (related to the proclamation of faith) thought in the Bahá'í way of thinking.

In the Bahá'í Writings the point of departure is the Will and Command of God, and this new recognition and manifestation of Divine Will in our time results in the same understanding of the progressive nature of reality, of spiritual reality and of human reality, or civic reality in the progress of sciences and arts. We now can say that both ways are legit-

imate, nevertheless, we will avow that the scientific progress is a consequence of the divine intervention in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. This conclusion is a result of the comprehension of the unity of the cosmos, of the wholeness of the world and, again, cannot be proven scientifically, as scientific discourse is not based on this or any other fundamentally metaphysical understanding of the world.

The choice is not a scientific one, the choice is a matter of the heart as Teilhard has indicated (3i) using the same concept of the heart as Bahá'u'lláh, who said in the Hidden Words:

*O My Brother! Harken to the delightful words of My honeyed tongue, and quaff the stream of mystic holiness from My sugar-shedding lips. Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart.*<sup>46</sup>

### Comparison 4 (cf. texts in Appendix 4)

Bahá'í:	Attraction and love as principle of Reality
Teilhard:	Love and reason as principle of existence in "spirit-matter"

This comparison will be brief, basically comparing only two texts. For every reader who has patiently proceeded to this point, it has become apparent that the principle of Unity, of the Whole, is the idea that connects the thinking of Teilhard and his understanding of the

evolution of the world with the Bahá'í principle of Unity and Progress in God's creation. While this understanding is clearly biblical, as Teilhard would insist, the Bible in the Christian tradition is usually not interpreted in that way, because it originated in a world that could not fathom this idea, in a world two thousand years removed from our times. This explains the resistance of the conservative Catholic hierarchy and of fundamentalist Protestants to Teilhard.

Teilhard perceives the world in a unity and in progress, consequently he sees the world as unity and the spiritual and the physical or material are for him not two different entities. In fact, the insistence of Christianity on individual salvation from the evils of this fallen world and its eager effort to secure this salvation in the next world culminates in the crucial question: "Am I saved?" Inquiring whether the world is saved, if the world is going in the right direction, or if there is an evolution of the world at all, is not a question for the typical safety seeking Christian. But it is a question of the modern thinker Teilhard, who restlessly and passionately pursued this idea throughout his life.

He solved this question in a newly conceived idea of evolution, which is only partially and rather accidentally dependent on Darwin or his followers, but is a result of a clearly mystical and personal seeking human being who was thoroughly imbued in the Christian message and, at the same time, was deeply involved in scientific research. Therefore, Teilhard came to the conclusion of the unity



between spirit and matter in the famous statement of the “universal multiple”: “*Spirit which is born within, and as a function of matter*” (italics in the original, see 4b). This statement centers and summarizes many of Teilhard’s writings.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá expresses the same thought in the quoted text (4a) and many more times in His other Writings. Separation brings “hurt and harm” and is actually the source of evil, while “union of created things yield most laudable results.” He further explains that this unification is a principle of the constitution of this world: “From the pairing of even the smallest particles in the world of being are the grace and bounty of God made manifest.” He adds a principle of importance in understanding how unity and plurality is connected positively and mutually in the world, when he continues: “the higher the degree, the more momentous the union” (4a).

When the pairing of even the smallest particles of the world are in principle the same as the union of the highest degree, i.e., the union between spirit and matter, the unity of the universe, the unity of all people of the world with each other and the union of their hearts, the union of humanity and God which we call religion, then the same is expressed in the Teilhardian principle that spirit and matter are not separated but a function of each other, that the spiritual world of the heart and soul and of God and the material world of physics and causality are not opposed, but are mutually interdependent. This is the nucleus of the attractiveness of the Teilhardian worldview to

modern thinkers of today. The same idea of the Whole and Unity of the world in progress could be the center of attraction of modern seekers to the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.

#### Comparison 5 (cf. texts in Appendix 5)

Bahá’í: Service to an ever advancing civilization, work as worship

Teilhard: Service in a “religion of the Earth”

This comparison is even more important as it deals with a rather new element of religion expressed by the Bahá’í Faith, i.e. work as worship and the value of the improvement of civilization of humanity (5a,b,c,d). This element is crucial as well in understanding the development of the world during the last century and the future development of modern societies. Consequently, it was an important concern of Teilhard as well.

It should not be forgotten that Karl Marx had started his career by defining work as the most important factor for man. In order to become himself, man has to create himself through work and, consequently, religion is in the way of this process and has to be eliminated. Marx certainly was not the only one at that time who promoted these ideas, nevertheless, he was the most successful one, albeit posthumously. The young Marx in his philosophical period saw God as an “alien being” in opposition to the new man, the “socialist man,” “who is nothing but the creation of man by human labor,”<sup>47</sup> and concludes that atheism must be the negation of this idea of God. Men had developed religion and the idea of God as cre-

ator as an “opium of the people” to produce a false happiness, because he did not understand that man does create himself by human labor.<sup>48</sup> This understanding of religion is frequently expressed by Marx: “Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.” In order to free man from all alienation, it is primarily postulated by Marx, that religion and the concept of God cannot be real, cannot exist, or at least will disappear rapidly, as soon as the new understanding of man is accepted.<sup>49</sup>

The unexpected worldwide success of Marxism in the last century is certainly related to many issues, but the acceptance of work as an essential element of human beings was definitely not the least important fact. Teilhard, as well, speaks constantly about this issue and reminds the Christians that they are not participating in this modern “religion of the earth” as he calls it. A dedicated scientist, he was keenly aware that the present form of Christianity is not in touch with the modern world, so he expressed his need by saying “The God whom I seek must reveal himself to me as a savior of man’s work.” (5e) This situation of the world, dedicated to the earth in work and science, is for Teilhard the driving force to request a change of religion, to ask for a new religion and to express his unceasing demand, that Christianity must and could accept this need of the world of modern man. This desire cumulates in the statement that “Christ must be born again.” (6e)

Teilhard states that the “supreme value

of life consists in devoting oneself body and soul to universal progress” (5g) and that one can understand “worship” only in a devotion of “body and soul,” to “the creative act” and to the fulfillment of oneself in “hard work and intellectual exploration.” (5h) In a sense, Teilhard goes farther than Marx in elevating work as a central obligation for humanity and he certainly does not see it in opposition to religion, as a matter of fact, he builds his religion on this truth.

It is certainly remarkable in this context that Bahá’u’lláh, born of an aristocratic family in Persia, founded the Bahá’í Faith during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, just at the same time as Karl Marx wrote his papers declaring that God had to be eliminated because of man being a product of his labor. And is it not even more of historical importance that Bahá’u’lláh placed work in the center of its principles, has equated work with worship of God, and has declared that humanity was created to promote civilization through work?

Another, not unrelated fact is the recognition that during the next half century, Teilhard in looking at the phenomenon of man noted the same need for a religion of the earth, a religion that does not turn people against the world in which they live, a religion that dedicates itself to progress and improvement of the world, a religion that does preserve the deepest claims of Christianity, but develops these claims into a powerful force in the modern world. Teilhard expected this change to come from the inner meaning of the biblical message, as

best expressed in the letters of Paul and as found in the gospels. And in the process of unification of all of the religions of the world, as prophesied in the Bahá'í Faith, this might yet have to happen, even though it is not really visible today.

In this context 'Abdu'l-Bahá talks of a spiritual civilization and a material civilization, compares them to body and soul and states that one cannot live without the other. Again a concept of Unity of two elements, in the past seen as contradicting each other, now declared as being both necessary and mutually supporting each other (5c,d).

**Comparison 6 (cf. texts in Appendix 6)**

Bahá'í: Return of Christ in  
Bahá'u'lláh

Teilhard: "Christ must be born again"

As student in the 1950s, when I first was exposed to the writings of Teilhard, his statements that Christ must be born again did not elicit any special attention from me, neither has it caused his critics to start an elaborate opposition, as they have against many of his other ideas. Teilhard's ideas of change, of evolution, were critically perceived as being opposed to orthodoxy, as were his positions on original sin and the evolution of man. I understood these statements probably exactly as Teilhard meant them. Progressive Christians, Catholic or Protestants, all knew that some change, some development is going to happen, that will make their religion more meaningful in the light of the achievements and horrors of modern times.

The ecumenical council Vatican II soon

became the hope of many, and its pastoral constitution is based in its conception on Teilhardian ideas. The development since, especially under the present pope has directed the Catholic Church in a more retro and conservative position. However that may be, nobody expected Christ to be born again and everybody, including probably Teilhard, accepted this statement as a symbolic rather than historical event. Teilhard in his statement expresses the need for change, for the rebirth of Christianity, but Christ is seen as Redeemer who will combine heaven and earth but "will take his place supernaturally (as seen by our faith) at the actual focus-point upon which the rays of evolution naturally (as seen by our science) converge" (6f).

On the other hand, the idea that is clearly expressed by Bahá'u'lláh and in the Bahá'í Writings is that the return of Christ has happened, has happened in this world as a historical event, has happened the same way it happened before: a human being, a man, born from a woman, is filled with the spirit of God and proclaims to be the Messenger of God, just like Jesus proclaimed His special function in manifesting His heavenly Father (6b).

Christians by and large accept the future return of Christ as a symbolic event and hardly believe it could happen in their lifetime; Bahá'ís on the contrary accept some of the biblical statements as symbolic, like the return in the heavens and the public and visible judgment over good and bad, but accept other biblical statements, like the return as a thief in the night and the rebirth, in a more concrete

and historical fashion. So Shoghi Effendi formulates as the most important distinction between all previous religions, especially Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith, the fact that Bahá'ís believe that the return of Christ has happened in history, has happened on this earth and has happened in the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, as it has happened before.

In spite of this fact, and following the trend of thought of Teilhard as explained above, reading his numerous statements indicating the needed changes, the need for a new religion and, yes, the need for Christ to be born again, we must sense a strong desire, an obvious passion and a mystical experience that leads the Teilhardian thinking in the direction of the return of Christ. It appears as though Teilhard felt the truth but could not perceive it, because of this knowledge and preconceived understanding. This is, as we know, the position of many Christian seekers, who just cannot believe what the Bahá'í Faith teaches.

One could deplore this fact, and one could hope that it will change. In any case, for Teilhard we can only say that one can sense a providential meaning in the fact that Teilhard was never seriously or at all confronted with the message of the Bahá'í Faith; he certainly never mentioned it in all the books that I have read. Because of that fact and because he could not overlook the need of his times and the lack of the previous religions to provide for humanity, what it clearly seems to need, he was forced to do two things. He firstly described the need of modern man more substantially and more deeply

than anybody else, and secondly, he searched the religions of the world, not only Christianity, but also Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the Chinese forms of devotion for an answer, which he could not find there. He further looked with open eyes into present day Christianity and found it lacking as well. As a devoted Christian, he did not give up his faith but deepened it and tried to find a solution in his faith for himself and for all other seeking souls of his time.

This made Teilhard a beacon towards a land he could not enter. Like a modern Moses, he stood on the mountain and looked into the Promised Land, without the possibility to go there. Teilhard has been called the prophet of the last century by followers of New Age spirituality. His statement that Christ must be born again certainly places him as close as possible into the new Jerusalem, announced by Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, he could not see Him who “verily, came down from Heaven even as He came down from it the first time” (6b). Neither did Pius IX to whom these words were originally directed by Bahá'u'lláh. The Pope either did not understand the message or did not accept any of it. Teilhard was open and seeking and in his writings prepared the way to a better understanding of the Bahá'í message, to a better unification of all religions of the world, and to an open invitation to all seeking souls.

## E. An Integral Vision

'Abdu'l-Bahá in one of His prayers stated the following about the privilege and special status of humanity, especially in acquiring knowledge and understanding of the hidden truths that are embedded in the heart of hearts of all that is:

*O God, O Thou Who hast cast Thy splendor over the luminous realities of men, shedding upon them the resplendent lights of knowledge and guidance, and hast chosen them out of all created things for this supernal grace, and hast caused them to encompass all things, to understand their inmost essence, and to disclose their mysteries, bringing them forth out of darkness into the visible world! "He verily showeth His special mercy to whomsoever He will."*

*O Lord, help Thou Thy loved ones to acquire knowledge and the sciences and arts, and to unravel the secrets that are treasured up in the inmost reality of all created things. Make them to hear the hidden truths that are written and embedded in the heart of all that is. Make them to be ensigns of guidance amongst all creatures, and piercing rays of the mind shedding forth their light in this, the "first life." Make them to be leaders unto Thee, guides unto Thy path, runners urging men on to Thy Kingdom.*

*Thou verily art the Powerful, the Protector, the Potent, the Defender, the Mighty, the Most Generous.*<sup>50</sup>

This paper was written with this impli-

cation and in following Shoghi Effendi's encouragement, on whose behalf it was stated:

*Study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.*<sup>51</sup>

It is hoped that this paper will have shown how close the progressive thinking of our days is to the Faith we profess, how deeply the Bahá'í principles have penetrated modern thought and how much they direct human civilization towards the goal of increasing humanness, in spite of the apparent breakdown of modern societies. Teilhard knew that Christ must be reborn, that a new religion must unfold and he described what he saw in his studies of the phenomenon of man. Not knowing about the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh he stretched the Christian message as far as possibly in the direction of the new worldview he had gained from science.

According to the Bahá'í principle of the unity of all religions of God, the only concept he could not understand was the issue of the return of Christ and the return of all Manifestations. One could employ the modern colloquialism that on this point he could not think "outside of the box" of Christian tradition but, by

giving Christ the epithet of “cosmic” and “universal,” he came as close as possible to the concept of Divine Manifestation, trying to fit Christian tradition into his new concept of the “God of evolution.”

As pointed out above, this process has not ended with the death of Teilhard and the publication of his work in 1955. Some of the New Age writers have tried to continue in Teilhard’s view, but have not been able to really comprehend the message of this writer, due to their lack of historical understanding. This was clearly pointed out by Ken Wilber,<sup>52</sup> who himself continued and expanded the new view of Teilhard and others into a impressive opus, that has been translated into more than 20 languages and has found followers in different lands, especially in Japan and Germany.<sup>53</sup>

Bahá’í theology is in its beginning stages and will develop together and in dialogue with today’s philosophy. It is this author’s conviction that in spite of Teilhard’s Catholic background and Wilber’s Buddhist influence, both authors, if understood in the Bahá’í context, will contribute to the development of a Bahá’í theology, thus promoting the Unity of all Religions of God as proclaimed in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.

## APPENDICES OF TEXTS

### Appendix 1

Bahá'í: Unity in diversity

Teilhard: Unity and multiplicity, the one and the many

Bahá'í Writings <sup>54</sup>	Teilhard <sup>55</sup>
<p><b>Bahá'u'lláh</b></p> <p>a) Please God, that we avoid the land of denial, and advance into the ocean of acceptance, so that we may perceive, with an eye purged from all conflicting elements, the worlds of unity and diversity, of variation and oneness, of limitation and detachment, and wing our flight unto the highest and innermost sanctuary of the inner meaning of the Word of God. <i>Kitáb-i-Íqán</i>, p. 160</p> <p><b>Abdu'l-Bahá</b></p> <p>b) You should strive to create a Bahá'í community, which will offer to the entire world a vibrant model of unity in diversity. <i>The Call into Being</i>, p. 16</p> <p><b>Shoghi Effendi</b></p> <p>c) Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh. Far from aiming at the subversion of the existing foundations of society, it seeks to broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity such as Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explained. . . <i>World Order of Bahá'u'lláh</i>, pp. 41-42</p>	<p>d) On the other hand the more we split and pulverize matter artificially, the more insistently it proclaims its fundamental unity. <i>The Phenomenon of Man</i>, p. 41</p> <p>e) The cosmos in which man finds himself caught up constitutes, by reason of the unimpeachable wholeness of its whole, a system, a totum, a quantum; a system by its plurality, a totum by its unity, a quantum by its energy; all three within a boundless contour. <i>The Phenomenon of Man</i>, p. 43</p> <p>f) The distressing spectacle of the multiplicity of the world and of its present state of disorder, which in the end forces us into an impassioned faith in the possibility of reducing that fragmentation to unity — in that lies the source of various philosophical currents. <i>Towards the Future</i>, p. 40</p> <p>g) The One and the Many; whence comes the fragmentation? And how can there be a return to unity? The increasing clarity with which this problem is seen, and the gradual approach to its solution, are probably guide to the stages (some of which are still to come) of anthropogenesis. <i>Towards the Future</i>, p. 40</p> <p>i) And now, the world of man — bursting with a new exuberance of energies and desires — disappointed, and yet more than ready to accept a new form — feels all the pain and anxiety of the need for a spiritual orientation. <i>Towards the Future</i>, 41</p> <p>j) From the modern point of view, which is governed by the idea of evolution, the one is not merely opposed to the multiple as a total perfection opposed to the sum of imperfections: partially at least, it is <i>born</i> from that multiple. Its unity is, to some degree, <i>woven</i> from the plurality whose consummation and synthesis it ensures. <i>Towards the Future</i>, p. 5</p>

## Appendix 2

Bahá'í: Independent Investigation

Teilhard: Our age an age of science

Bahá'í Writings	Teilhard
<p><b>Bahá'u'lláh</b></p> <p>a) Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder. <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh</i>, pp. 141-142</p> <p><b>Abdu'l-Bahá</b></p> <p>b) The first [of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings] is the independent investigation of truth; for blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind. But once every soul inquireth into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past. <i>Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá</i>, 248</p> <p>c) Among these teachings was the independent investigation of reality so that the world of humanity may be saved from the darkness of imitation and attain to the truth; may tear off and cast away this ragged and outgrown garment of a thousand years ago and may put on the robe woven in the utmost purity and holiness in the loom of reality. As reality is one and cannot admit of multiplicity, therefore different opinions must ultimately become fused into one. <i>Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá</i>, 298</p> <p><b>Shoghi Effendi</b></p> <p>d) The extent of their future undertakings in both continents; their contribution to the Global Crusade to be launched throughout the whole planet; their particular and, in many ways, unique, reinforcement of the work, connected with future Bahá'í research and scholarship, in view of the characteristic qualities of painstaking thoroughness, scientific exactitude and dispassionate criticism distinguishing the race to which they belong, — these are too vast and complex to be assessed at the present time. <i>Light of Divine Guidance</i>, vol. 1, p. 185</p>	<p>e) If this book (<i>The Phenomenon of Man</i>) is to be properly understood, it must be read not as a work on metaphysics, still less as a sort of theological essay, but purely and simply as a scientific treatise. The title itself indicates that. This book deals with man solely as a phenomenon; but it also deals with the whole phenomenon of man. <i>The Phenomenon of Man</i>, p. 13</p> <p>f) Truth is nothing other than the total coherence of the universe in relation to each part of itself. Why suspect or underestimate this coherence because we ourselves are observers? The truth of human beings is the truth of the universe for human beings, that is, the truth, pure at simple. <i>Teilhard Lexicon</i>, p. 199</p> <p>g) We are given to boasting of our age being an age of science. And if we are thinking merely of the dawn compared to the darkness that went before, up to a point we are justified. Something enormous has been born in the universe with our discoveries and our methods of research. Something has been started which, I am convinced, will now never stop. Yet though we may exalt research and derive enormous benefit from it, with what pettiness of spirit, poverty of means and general haphazardness do we pursue truth in the world today! <i>The Phenomenon of Man</i>, p. 278</p> <p>h) Thus, from the patient, prosaic, but cumulative work of scientists of all types, there has spontaneously emerged the most impressive revelation of the Whole that could possibly be conceived. . . . Today the universe, in its totality and unity, forces itself inexorably on our attention, Whatever the avenue opened up by our thought or our activity, there it stands, whole and entire, to be burden to us, to fascinate us, or to exalt us. <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 63</p>



## Appendix 3

Bahá'í: Progressive Revelation

Teilhard: "Religion of Evolution," "Cosmic Progress"

Bahá'í Writings	Teilhard
<p><b>Bahá'u'lláh</b></p> <p>a) The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquility of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God. <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh</i>, pp. 129-130</p> <p><b>'Abdu'l-Bahá</b></p> <p>b) Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving, and progressive. If it be without motion and non-progressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead. The divine institutes are continuously active and evolutionary; therefore, the revelation of them must be progressive and continuous. All things are subject to reformation. This is a century of life and renewal. Sciences and arts, industry and invention have been reformed. Law and ethics have been reconstituted, reorganized. The world of thought has been regenerated. Sciences of former ages and philosophies of the past are useless today. <i>Promulgation of Universal Peace</i>, p. 140</p> <p>c) Among the bounties of God is revelation. Hence revelation is progressive and continuous. It never ceases. <i>Promulgation of Universal Peace</i>, p. 378</p> <p><b>Shoghi Effendi</b></p> <p>d) The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh . . . is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. . . . <i>Promised Day Is Come</i>, p. 1</p>	<p>e) For such a Christian, accordingly, the universe has ceased to extend the primary of its organic unity over the whole field of interior experience: the operation of salvation, reduced to being no more than a matter of personal success, develops without any reference to cosmic evolution. Christianly gives the impression of not believing in human progress. <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 126</p> <p>f) The universe, we may well believe, has now finally and permanently been appreciated by our generation as an organic whole, advancing towards an ever higher degree of freedom and personality. By that very fact, the only religion mankind wants and can henceforth acknowledge is one that is capable of justifying, assimilating and animating cosmic progress. <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 154</p> <p>g) As a result, then, of life's very recent passing through a new critical point in the course of its development, no older religious form or formulation can any longer (either factually or logically) satisfy to the full our need and capacity for worship . . . So true is this, that a 'religion of the future' (definable as a 'religion of evolution') cannot fail to appear before long; a new mysticism, <i>here and now</i>. <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 240</p> <p>h) Just suppose that we <i>identify</i> (at least in his 'natural' aspect) the cosmic Christ of faith with the Omega point of science; then everything in our outlook is clarified and broadened, and fall into harmony. . . . If we are to effect the synthesis between faith in God and faith in the world, for which our generation is waiting, there is nothing better we can do than dogmatically to bring out, in the person of Christ, the cosmic aspect and function which make him organically the prime mover and controller, the 'soul' of evolution. <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 180</p> <p>i) Only <i>purity of heart</i> (assisted or not by grace, as the case may be) <i>and not pure science</i> is capable, . . . of overcoming the essential indeterminacy of appearances and of unmistakably disclosing a creator behind the forces of nature – and the Divine underlying the abnormal. <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 30</p>

## Appendix 4

Bahá'í: Attraction and love as principle of Reality

Teilhard: Love and reason as principle of existence in “spirit-matter”

Bahá'í Writings	Teilhard
<p><b>‘Abdu’l-Bahá</b></p> <p>a) From separation doth every kind of hurt and harm proceed, but the union of created things doth ever yield most laudable results. From the pairing of even the smallest particles in the world of being are the grace and bounty of God made manifest; and the higher the degree, the more momentous is the union.  <i>Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Bahá</i>, p. 119</p>	<p>b) It (the spirit) in no way represents some entity, which is independent of matter or antagonistic to it, some force locked up in, or floating in, the physical world. By spirit I mean ‘the spirit of synthesis and sublimation’, in which is painfully concentrated, through endless attempts and setbacks, the potency of unity scattered throughout the universal multiple: <i>spirit which is born within, and as a function of matter.</i>  <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, pp. 107-108</p>

## Appendix 5

Bahá'í: Service to an ever advancing civilization, work as worship

Teilhard: Service in a “religion of the Earth”

Bahá'í Writings	Teilhard
<p><b>Bahá'u'lláh</b></p> <p>a) All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.  <i>Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh</i>, 215</p> <p>b) It is enjoined upon every one of you to engage in some form of occupation, such as crafts, trades and the like. We have graciously exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship unto God, the True One. Ponder ye in your hearts the grace and the blessings of God and render thanks unto Him at eventide and at dawn. Waste not your time in idleness and sloth. Occupy yourselves with that which profiteth yourselves and others.  <i>Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh</i>, p. 26</p> <p><b>‘Abdu’l-Bahá</b></p> <p>c) Bahá'u'lláh taught that hearts must receive the Bounty of the Holy Spirit, so that Spiritual civilization may be established. For material civilization is not adequate for the needs of mankind and cannot be the cause of its happiness. Material civilization is like the body and spiritual civilization is like the soul. Body without soul cannot live.  <i>Abdu’l-Bahá in London</i>, p. 30</p> <p>d) God gave this power to man that it might be used for the advancement of civilization, for the good of humanity, to increase love and concord and peace.  <i>Paris Talks</i>, p. 42</p>	<p>a) The God whom I seek must reveal himself to me as a savior of man’s work.  <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 123</p> <p>b) We are now finding that the concentration of scientific research, focused <i>ahead</i> on the extension of the ‘phenomenon of man’, is opening up an even more astonishing prospect in that direction: that of a progressive ‘humanization’ of mankind.  <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 140</p> <p>c) In spite of many differences in detail, a rapidly increasing number of our contemporaries are henceforth agreed in recognizing that the supreme value of life consists in devoting oneself body and soul to universal progress – this progress being expressed in the tangible development of mankind.  <i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 123</p> <p>d) To worship was formerly to prefer God to things, relating them to him and sacrificing them for him. To worship is now becoming to devote oneself body and soul to the creative act, associating oneself with that act in order to fulfill the world by hard work and intellectual exploration.  <i>Christianity and Evolution</i></p>

## Appendix 6

Bahá’í: Return of Christ in Bahá’u’lláh

Teilhard: “Christ must be born again”

Bahá’í Writings	Teilhard
<p><b>Bahá’u’lláh</b></p> <p>a) Wherefore, should one of these Manifestations of Holiness proclaim saying: “I am the return of all the Prophets,” He verily speaketh the truth. In like manner, in every subsequent Revelation, the return of the former Revelation is a fact, the truth of which is firmly established. Inasmuch as the return of the Prophets of God, as attested by verses and traditions, hath been conclusively demonstrated, the return of their chosen ones also is therefore definitely proven. This return is too manifest in itself to require any evidence or proof.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Kitáb-i-Íqán</i>, p. 154</p> <p>b) O POPE! Rend the veils asunder. He Who is the Lord of Lords is come overshadowed with clouds, and the decree hath been fulfilled by God, the Almighty, the Unrestrained . . . He, verily, hath again come down from Heaven even as He came down from it the first time. Beware that thou dispute not with Him even as the Pharisees disputed with Him (Jesus) without a clear token or proof. On His right hand flow the living waters of grace, and on His left the choice Wine of justice, whilst before Him march the angels of Paradise, bearing the banners of His signs.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh</i>, p. 83</p> <p><b>Shoghi Effendi</b></p> <p>c) You should point out to the believers that, by belonging to other organized religious bodies, we are not acting openly because we firmly believe Christ has come again – so how can we belong to a church, which does not accept Bahá’u’lláh and His message as the fulfillment of Jesus’ message and the reappearance of Jesus Himself?</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Light of Divine Guidance</i> vol. 1, p. 107</p> <p>d) The churches are waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ; we believe He has come again in the Glory of the Father.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Light of Divine Guidance</i> vol. 1, p. 123</p>	<p>e) After what will soon be two thousand years, Christ must be born again, he must be reincarnated in a world that has become too different from that in which he lived. Christ cannot reappear tangibly among us; but he can reveal to our minds a new and triumphant aspect of his former countenance. I believe that the Messiah whom we await, whom we all without any doubt await, is the universal Christ, the Christ of evolution.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 95</p> <p>f) The great event with which our day is pregnant, and whose birth we must assist, may well be, surely, that these two spiritual currents may feed, swell, and fertilize one another, and so by synthesis, make Christianity break through into a new sphere: the very sphere in which the Redeemer, combining in himself the energies of both heaven and earth, will take his place supernaturally (as seen by our faith) at the actual focus-point upon which the rays of evolution naturally (as seen by our science) converge.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 148</p> <p>g) The fact is that Christianity has already in existence for two thousand years, and the time has come (as it does for every other physical reality) when it needs to be rejuvenated by an injection of new elements.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Christianity and Evolution</i>, p. 147</p>

### Notes

1. For readers who are not familiar with the Bahá'í Faith a very brief introduction will be added here. The Bahá'í Faith understands itself as being the most recent revelation of the One Religion of God, that was presented to the world in many different steps by the founders of all previous religions, such as Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Christ, Mohammad, and in our age the Báb (1819-1850) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1893). Bahá'u'lláh was born a nobleman in Persia, today Iran. The Báb, a forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, was executed through a firing squad 6 years after His announcement of the new revelation in 1844. Bahá'u'lláh was a prisoner for 40 years, first of the Shah of Persia in Teheran and then exiled to Baghdad, from there exiled to Constantinople to Adrianople and finally confined in the prison city of Akka. On His death He transferred the leadership of His Cause to His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá who guided the faith and visited many European countries and the USA in 1912. In His testament He transferred the Guardianship of the faith to Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), His Grandson, who at that time was a student in Oxford England. Under his Guardianship the Bahá'í Faith grew to a world religion, today the fastest growing of all world religions. Counting approximately 6 million members, the Faith today is spread out over the whole world, second only to Christianity.
2. *Importance of Deepening*, p. 152.
3. "Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply. One might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them." Excerpt from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 19 April 1947, *The Importance of Deepening*, pages 228-229.
4. Quoted from the foreword by Norman L. Geisler, in David H. Lane, *The Phenomenon of Teilhard, Prophet for a New Age* (Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1996).
5. Ibid. page 81.
6. Wolfgang Smith, *Teilhardism and the New Religion, a Thorough Analysis of the Teaching of Pierre Teilhard of Chardin* (Tan Books and Publishers Inc., Rockford, Illinois, 1988).
7. Quoted from David H. Lane, *ibid.*, page 89. The full quote states:  
Rama Coomaraswamy (*The Destruction of the Christian Tradition*, 129-130) is quite correct when he states: These concepts of 'progress' and 'evolution' are the most pernicious pseudodogmas and pseudomyths that the world has ever produced. This is not to state that they do not exist, but their existence is partial and of quite limited applicability, and never without their antithesis in degradation and degeneration. The Truth, being timeless and immutable, is clearly immune from such 'forces of change.'
8. Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1893) is believed by Bahá'ís to be a Divine Manifestation (like the other Prophets of the world religions) and the founder Prophet and of the Bahá'í Faith. See endnote 1.
9. Shoghi Effendi (1896-1957), the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, in *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 1. Compare in this context the paper from Moojan Momen "Relativism: a Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics" in *Studies in Honor of the Late Husayn M. Balyuzi: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*. Vol. 5, ed. Moojan Momen (Los Angeles; Kalimat Press, 1988).

10. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God, The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994).
11. The proposition that “man makes religion, religion does not make man,” was anticipated by Feuerbach and then popularized by Karl Marx in, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” in *Karl Marx selected writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 1977), page 63. In this sense, it could be stated that the New Age might attempt, in a post modern attitude, to solve the problem of atheistic Marxism and Armstrong’s statement seems to be based on a similar way of thinking, as if religion was a creation of man.
12. Stephane Courtois et al. in: *The Black Book of Communism, Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1999):  

These are the “cold” statistics of the victims of communism as described in this book page 4:

U.S.S.R:	20 million deaths
China	65 million deaths
Vietnam	1 million deaths
North Korea	2 million deaths
Cambodia	2 million deaths
Eastern Europe	1 million deaths
Latin America	150,000 deaths
Africa	1.7 million deaths
Afghanistan	1.5 million deaths
13. Charles S. Henderson in Chapter 5 of his book *Towards a Science charged with Faith* (John Knox Press, 1986), revised and expanded under *God and Science*, p. 1.
14. Ibid. p. 1.
15. This was concisely expressed by Moojan Momen in “Bahá’í Scholarship – Definitions and Perspectives,” published in the *Bahá’í Studies Review*, vol. 3.2 (1993) when he described the “scientific” or “academic” methodology: “The methodology of the academic study of the Bahá’í Faith is that everything is explicable from the outside, that any text or episode in Bahá’í history is explicable from the external circumstances. Everything has an explanation in terms of psychology, sociology, economics or whatever.” And later: “On the other hand, the academic study of the Bahá’í Faith is based on a methodology that is basically irreligious, in the sense that it is methodology which assumes that God does not intervene in the world.”
16. Teilhard, “How I believe,” page 101 in *Christianity and Evolution* (Harcourt Brace & Company: San Diego, 1969).
17. This was presented in a consequent continuation of Teilhardian thinking, and based on the tenets of perennial philosophy (Plato, Plotinus), and of developmental psychology, as well as the transpersonal psychology by Ken Wilber, see *A Theory of Everything, An integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality* (Shambhala: Boston, 2001), especially Chapter 3, page 33 passim and throughout his other works.
18. In *Dialog and Universalism*, Polish Academy of Science, 11-12/1996, Published monthly by “Centre of Universalism” (Warsaw University: Poland, 1996), several authors from three different continents present contribution to the topic “The Bahá’í Faith, Universalism in Practice,” Guest Editor: Jan T. Jasion. The different aspects of Universalism and the Bahá’í Faith are described especially by Udo Schaefer, “Bahá’u’lláh’s Unity Paradigm” (p. 23), and Jan T. Jasion: “The Universalism of the Bahá’í as reflected in the writings of Shoghi Effendi” (p. 105) and Phyllis Sternberg Parrakis, Bahá’í Universalism: “Uniting Religious Belief and Social Ideology,” (p. 17).
19. David H. Lane and Wolfgang Smith, *ibid.*, see endnotes 6 and 8.
20. *Dialog and Universalism*, *ibid.* p. 14.
21. This methodological distinction between cause in the physical sciences and meaning in social science was clearly developed by Othmar Spann in this *Gesellschaftslehre* (Sociology) (Verlagsbuchhandlung Quelle

- & Meyer, Leipzig, 1923), who based his science on the philosophical theory of Wholeness (Ganzheit) and developed a system and methodology appropriate to this worldview, following the “philosophia perennis” of Aristotle, Avicenna, Aquinas and the romantic German philosophy. It is not surprising that one of the few American studies on Othmar Spann totally missed this point and only looked at the political errors and mistakes Spann made. In the abstract to his dissertation John J. Haag (*Othmar Spann and the Politics of “Totality,” Corporatism in Theory and Practice* (Dissertation, Rice University, Houston Texas, 1969), clearly reveals his materialistic prejudice when he defines philosophy as “verbiage” stating: “stripped of its Romanticist and metaphysical verbiage, Spann’s social and political theory revealed itself to be little more than an elitist variant of Pan-German nationalism.” This one-sided misunderstanding of Haag is already expressed in the Title of his dissertation where he talks about the Politics of “Totality,” a word Spann did not use in his philosophical “verbiage,” even though “Total” and “Totalität” were key word in Nazi propaganda. Obviously, Spann misjudge the growing National Movement in Austria and Germany, but he certainly was in good company in this misunderstanding, when considering that the Cardinal of Vienna, Innitzer, tried a similar rapprochement with Hitler with devastating consequences, i.e. a storm of Nazi youth at his Residence and the murder of a priest, who could not hide himself, like the Cardinal.
22. Othmar Spann has described these three methodological steps as the method of his *Gesellschaftslehre* (ibid. page 531), of any historical or sociological investigation: 1. Recognizing the whole of the area of investigation, 2. Recognizing how the members or parts relate to each other and 3. Recognizing how the individual parts have to be understood in their respective whole. In the process used in this paper these three levels have been reversed to provide a systematic method of comparison.
23. See below, note 26.
24. Ken Wilber has extended and continued in the Teilhardian tradition, including the Perennial Philosophy, the German Idealists and Process Philosophy of Whitehead. Ian Kluge, writing about Whitehead and Chardin, placed this development into the Bahá’í Theology and concludes: “we may conclude that by studying other process philosophies such as Whitehead’s and de Chardin’s, we will discover new ways to enrich our understanding of the Writings themselves. For Bahá’is this is valuable as a deepening of their knowledge of their religious faith; for non-Bahá’is, this is valuable as shedding new light on a relatively un-explored aspect of humanity’s intellectual history” (Ian Kluge, “Process Philosophy and the Bahá’í Writings: An Initial Exploration,” at [www.geocities.com/iankluge/ian\\_kluge\\_whitehead-dechardin.rtf](http://www.geocities.com/iankluge/ian_kluge_whitehead-dechardin.rtf) 2003.
- Similar and more extended thoughts can be found in Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, The Spirit of Evolution*, Shambalha, Boston London, 2000, see chapter 4 (“A View from Within,” pages 115-158) and chapter 9 (“The Way UP Is the Way Down,” pages 329-354). The Opus of Ken Wilber deserves further study, especially in its closeness to the philosophical understanding expressed in the Bahá’í Writings.
25. The translation norms as described by Gideon Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation*, (Jerusalem: Academic Press, 1980), are adapted from the paper by Diana Malouf, “The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh, Translation Norms Employed by Shoghi Effendi,” in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi, Proceedings of the Association for Bahá’í Studies Ninth Annual Conference, November 1984, Ottawa Canada* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá’í Studies, 1993). Malouf indicates that Translation Studies are a relatively

new field (ibid. page 131), the translation from different thought system to another are even less studied. In this paper, the English translation of both the Bahá'í writings and the Teilhardian texts are assumed of having established sufficiently the norms of translation from the different languages, the task of applying the norms for translating of one system of thinking to another will be attempted in this paper, a study of these issues of epistemology as applied to the task of comparing modern thinkers with the Bahá'í writings is still outstanding.

26. The pages of the Appendix are indicated by the number and the corresponding text is indicated by the following letter, so that 1abc means referral to the texts a, b, c on the Appendix 1.
27. Othmar Spann, a contemporary of Teilhard, has a similar understanding of the whole and the parts, the one and the many. Compare this brief and formal definition of "Gesellschaft" (Othmar Spann, *Gesellschaftslehre (Sociology)*, 1923) Seite 509 (translated by this writer):

Expressed in a short phrase, the formal concept of Society can be defined according to the universalistic understanding as follows: Society is spiritual and acting Wholeness - a formula consisting of three characteristics: "Wholeness," which is the most general form or essence of Society (this is in contrast to the individualistic understanding of Society); "spiritual" is a closer characterization of this wholeness; insofar as it is not the biological, not the living-substantial wholeness, which characterizes society (as it is biologically present in an organism) "acting" is the second attribute of the social Wholeness, on the one hand this expresses its purely serving nature, for example in the economy (economy is a mean towards goals); on the other hand, this attribute expresses the quality, the realization, and the unfoldment (self presentation) of the spiritual." The German word "Ganzheit" is here translated as Wholeness, the temptation to translate it with the simpler concept of Totality (see John J. Haag, ibid.) must be resisted, as this word is equally available in

German (Totalität), but never used by Spann for obvious reasons. The rather awkward English translation of "Ganzheit" with Wholeness cannot be avoided, since only this concept conveys the idea of a whole, a healthy and integrated unity, which are all description used for Ganzheit by Spann in his universalistic understanding of the whole and the parts.

28. The thoughts presented here are strongly influenced by Augustinus Karl Wucherer Huldenfeld, *Ursprüngliche Erfahrung und personales Sein: (Original Experience and personal existence)*, p. 434-445, who writes about the new history of the integral opposition, between the unity and multiplicity, which is expressed in the idea of the integral whole. Unity is based on Unification and Wucherer discusses the thoughts of Teilhard about multiplicity and unity, quoting Teilhard who stated that the human thinking has never stopped to deal with the question of unity and multiplicity, spirit and matter and Teilhard expresses his opinion that this problem is on the basis of all of physics, philosophy and religion. (pp. 406-420.) In another paper in *Zur Aktualität des integralen Denkens Leo Gabriels (About the Actuality of the integral thinking of Leo Gabriel)* by Augustinus Karl Wucherer-Huldenfeld, (presented at the 100 year anniversary of the Birthday of Leo Gabriel, at the University at Vienna November 27, 2002), he describes that unity, which seems to contradict on a lower level with diversity and multiplicity, can be established on a higher level of being. Teilhard de Chardin, for example, mentions the law of entropy in the physical world, which is not valid on the biological level. In *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper and Row, New York, 1975), page 66.
29. This concept is extensively explained in most of Wilber's books; see for example *The Essential Ken Wilber, An Introductory Reader*, Shambhala, Boston and London, 1998, chapter "Holons and Hierarchy," page 55 and "Reality Is Made

- of Holons,” page 61.
30. Ibid. p. 61.
  31. Ibid. p. 56. In the following parts of this paper the continuation of the Teilhardian concept of unity by Wilber will not be commented upon, except in the final summary of this paper.
  32. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, LXXV, p. 123.
  33. Mathew, 17:10-13:  
*And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.*
  34. Wucherer Huldenfeld, Ibid., page 406 passim about Teilhard: *Zur Ontologie der Vereinigung* (About the ontology of unification), where he not only explains Teilhard's scientific origin in the scholastic tradition of the Jesuit order, but also develops the Teilhardian thinking about unification into the idea of the integral whole, see note 30.
  35. Shoghi Effendi, *ibid.*, see endnote 3.
  36. In spite of many differences in detail, a rapidly increasing number of our contemporaries are henceforth agreed in recognizing that the supreme value of life consist in devoting oneself body and soul to universal progress – this progress being expressed in the tangible developments of mankind. It is a very long time since the world has witnessed such an effect of ‘conversion’. This, surely, can only mean that in forms that vary (communist or nationalist, scientific or political, individual or collective) we have without any doubt been watching for the last century the birth and establishment of a new faith; the religion of evolution.  
 Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, *ibid.*, page 123.
  37. Ashbrook and Albright in their book *The Humanizing Brain, Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).
  38. Ibid. Introduction p. XXIX.
  39. Ibid. Introduction p. XXXI.
  40. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 60
  41. This writer expresses his thanks to Iraj Ayman, who made him aware of this translation issue.
  42. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXXI, pp. 74-75.
  43. see endnote 16.
  44. Among others, compare the books by Lane and Smith, see endnotes 6 and 8.
  45. The Western theological theory of satisfaction, a rather legalistic concept promoted by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) implying that God had to send His Son to earth in order to satisfy divine justice through His own Son's death in order to save humanity, is today rather generally accepted in Western Christianity, even though it was never defined as a dogma in the Catholic Church. See Karl Rahner, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch (Brief Theological Lexicon)*, Herder Bücherei, Freiburg i. Br., Germany 1961 (“Satisfaktionstheorien”). A vivid description of this theory and its influence in Catholic Theology to this day is presented by James Carroll in *Toward a New Catholic Church, The Promise of Reform*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, 2002, Page 77 passim, contrasting Salvation with Revelation as the central message of the Bible.
  46. Bahá'u'lláh: Persian Hidden Words, p. 33
  47. Towards a Critique of Hegel's *philosophy of right, 1843, quoted from Karl Marx, Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 63.
  48. Ibid. p. 95.
  49. Under postulatory atheism, we understand a worldview, which postulates the non-existence of God from the assertion of man's dignity and freedom, based on



his ability to change the world. See Augustinus Karl Wucherer-Huldenfel, 1994 “Marx und Freud: Zur Problematic der Struktur des Atheismus innerhalb ihrer Religionskritik” (Marx and Freud, Essay about the problematic of the structure of atheism in its critique of religion). Further, passim in his volume of selected studies I, 1994 and II, 1997 (Böhlau Verlag Wien, Köln, Weimar, 1997); this concept is expressed especially in the section about the “structure of the postulatory atheism,” pp. 447-450.

50. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Prayers*, p. 103.

51. See endnote 2.

52. Ken Wilber in: *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, The Spirit of Evolution* (Shambhala, Boston & London, 2000), pp. 654-655, where he states that these writers overlook the dialectic of progress.

53. Ibid. pp. 115-119 where he describes the “View from Within” quoting Teilhard stating: “*Things have their within*. I am convinced that the two points of view require to be brought into union, and that they soon will unite in a kind of phenomenology or generalized physic in which the internal aspect of things, as well as the external aspect of the world will be taken into account. Otherwise, so it seems to me, it is impossible to cover the totality of the cosmic phenomenon by on coherent explanation.” Wilber has developed this within in his “All quadrant all level” theory that has *explicated this statement* of Teilhard into a full-fledged philosophy, or a “theory of everything” as one of his book titles claims. It is hoped that this new opus of Wilber will find its Bahá’í interpreter, as other modern philosopher have. Compare the paper of Ian Kluge dealing with Heidegger and existentialism, “The Call into Being: An Introduction to a Bahá’í Existentialism” ([www.bahai-library.org/articles/existentialism.kluge.html](http://www.bahai-library.org/articles/existentialism.kluge.html)).

54. In the Appendix all quotes from the Bahá’í writings are copied from: Bahá’í Library

CD-ROM (Laguna Hills California: Digital Era Productions, 2001).

55. The following books of Teilhard are quoted in the Appendix by name and page: Teilhard de Chardin,

*The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper & Row, New York, 1975).

*Christianity and Evolution* (Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, 1974).

*Towards the Future* (Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, 1973)

*The Teilhard Lexicon, Understanding the language, terminology and vision of the writings of Teilhard de Chardin* (Brighton: Sion Cowell, Sussex Academic Pres, 2001)

# Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings

## An Initial Exploration

*Ian Kluge*

### Dedication

In fond memory of Professor Reuben Bonney who introduced me to Whitehead so many years ago.

Also, profound thanks to Dr. John Cobb Jr. of the Center for Process Studies for his suggestions for improving the accuracy of wording in certain passages relating to Whitehead.

Finally, thanks to Gerald Keil for his labour in proof-reading this work.

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*Panta rhei.*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Process philosophy and its off-shoot, process theology, stand among the most important intellectual developments of the last century. Although process thought in the West has a long and distinguished history, beginning with Heraclitus and extending through Schelling, Hegel, Marx and Schopenhauer among others, it is Whitehead's and Teilhard de Chardin's versions that have particularly inspired modern and contemporary philosophers and theologians. This is especially true in the case of Whitehead whose broad-based and far-reaching theories, explicated with the rigour expected of a logician, mathematician and mathematical physicist, have originated an entire philosophical-theological movement personified by such distinguished names as Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin. Like Teilhard de Chardin in his own speciality of evolution, these thinkers have sought to harmonise empirical science and religion in what is called "natural theology." For this reason alone, process philosophy and theology are of great interest to Bahá'ís since the explicit teachings of Bahá'u'lláh commit them to a belief in the ultimate one-ness of all truth and the harmony of science and religion.<sup>2</sup> However, process philosophy, especially as espoused by Whitehead and Chardin, has other attractions for Bahá'ís. Among these are a thorough-going evolutionary vision of the natural

world; a willingness to draw data from all aspects of human experience and not just from the abstracted experience of mathematics and laboratory experiments; an ability to accommodate a variety of viewpoints within a logically coherent system; acknowledgement of the logical necessity of God and a recognition of humankind's unique status in the cosmos. On these grounds alone, it is clear that there are sufficient significant similarities between the Bahá'í Writings and process philosophies of Whitehead and de Chardin to make a comparison and contrast study worthwhile. However, this must not be misunderstood to mean that there is always a plainly obvious point-by-point agreement between the Writings and contemporary process philosophy. Rather, we must understand that they are often complementary, which is to say, they are like fellow travellers: going in the same direction, sometimes by the same and sometimes by different paths — but never so far apart that they lose complete sight of each other. In practical terms this means that Bahá'ís will eventually have to contribute their own version of process philosophy and theology.

## An Outline of Whitehead's Process World-View

The fundamental idea underlying all varieties of process philosophy is the belief that the concept of 'process' or 'change' is basic to any ontological description of reality. Whitehead's first Category of explanation states that "the

actual world is a process, and that process is the becoming of actual entities.”<sup>3</sup> ‘Change’ or ‘process’ includes, among other things, movement, growth, renewal, decay, emergence, actualisation or ‘concrecence’ in Whitehead’s language, creativity, transition, sublimation, dialectic, transformation, expansion, contraction, reception, causal action, adaptation, complexification, enrichment, augmentation, synthesis, catalysis and perishing. According to the process world-view nothing in the natural world – with the possible exception of some aspects of God – is exempt from one kind of change or another. Even apparent stabilities are to be explained as repetitions or regularities of change. In other words, unchanging ‘things’ are not what endure, but rather, patterns or regularities of change in small, micro-processes or large, macro-processes. An individual of any kind, be it an atom, a star, a virus or a human being, is a succession of states or experiences which constitute the reality of that individual. The concept of potentials also plays a significant role in the process world-view because each individual and kind or class of thing is defined by the changes which are possible for them. Everything in nature has potentials for only certain kinds of changes and these potentials help to define them as what they are. Furthermore, the process world-view sees the entire cosmos as a single, organically connected whole in which, directly or indirectly, everything exerts influence on everything else. In varying ways, most, if not all, process philosophers see God not

only as logically necessary in order to explain nature adequately, but also as taking some sort of role in cosmic developments, be it at the level of micro or macro processes.

Process philosophers reject metaphysical materialism insofar as they reject the notion that ultimately stable atoms or sub-atomic particles of whatever dimension are the final building blocks of natural reality. There are no final ‘building blocks’ in the sense of there being some final, indivisible physical entities; there are only “actual occasions,” “drops” or “units” of experience,” happenings or events of creativity and the relations between them. In the process world-view, the ultimate category of understanding ourselves and the cosmos is ‘creativity’.<sup>4</sup> It is also evident that process philosophy is inherently social insofar as it sees all things, micro or macro, as involved in on-going relations essential to their constitutions or essential natures. Without getting bogged down in the details, or in the specialised terminology process philosophers have developed, we may say that each event arises, manifests its potentials in its inter-action with other events and then “perishes” after having attained “satisfaction,” that is, actualised its potentials. As noted before, what appears to us as a substantial entity is, in actual fact, a pattern repeating itself. Ultimately, the universe is made of ‘events,’ some of which manifest in patterns we identify with physical matter and others which manifest in patterns we identify with ‘mind’ or ‘soul’. In the

process view, 'mind,' 'soul' and 'body' are simply different patterns or configurations that events or "actual occasions" may manifest to human apprehension.<sup>5</sup>

The process world-view accepts the principle that reality from very simplest to the most complex entities is evolutionary although the amount of development undergone by some "actual occasions" is so minuscule as to be, for all practical purposes, non-existent, at least over relatively short periods of time. This evolutionary process has no end and is, for process theists, co-eternal with God, however He might be imagined. It is on the issue of evolution that a difference of focus appears among process philosophers; on one hand we have those who, like Whitehead, tend to focus on the basic metaphysical nature of the universe and the theological implications thereof, whereas, on the other hand we have those who, like de Chardin<sup>6</sup>, focus on human evolution and its possible developments in the future. In these works, Bahá'ís, prepared by the Writings, find themselves ready to encounter ideas that, at the very least, harmonise comfortably with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. This is especially true in the case of de Chardin whose vision of human evolution inevitably strikes Bahá'ís positively because of its emphasis on our spiritual development.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify an important issue lest it impede understanding. On the part of some, there is a temptation to say that process philosophies represent a rejection of the

concept of 'being' in favour of 'becoming'. It is imperative to resist such a simplistic conclusion. Whiteheadian process philosophy does not reject 'being' per se but rather explains our being in terms of becoming. As Whitehead says, "According to the Ninth Category of Explanation, *how* an actual entity becomes constitutes *what* that actual entity is. This principle states that the *being* of a *res vera* is constituted by its '*becoming*'.<sup>7</sup>" In other words, instead of saying there is a single enduring entity or substance called 'John Smith' which undergoes accidental changes, we say there is a process called 'John Smith' which repeats certain recognisable patterns and exhibits certain new ones. We have our being in or through our becoming, rather than in a single, changeless substance. Process philosophies clearly recognise the importance of both 'being' and 'becoming' as undeniable aspects of the cosmos and human experience; they differ from some other philosophies in how they understand and explain these terms.

### Continuation and Break with Plato and Aristotle

From the foregoing, we may conclude that process philosophy both continues and breaks with an analysis of reality begun by Plato and Aristotle. It represents a continuation of Plato insofar as it accepts the concept of Platonic Ideas, now termed "eternal objects,"<sup>8</sup> as the always available potentially real attributes that an "actual entity"<sup>9</sup> might possess.

In other words, the Platonic Ideas have been transformed into potentials available for actualisation by real processes which participate in the “eternal objects” just as the earthly images or counterparts participate in Plato’s Ideas. It should be noted that Whitehead included Platonic Ideas because this was necessary to develop a logically coherent system. Plato, of course, thought of the Ideas as entities more real than their earthly, material counterparts, but Whitehead does not agree with this. To him, they are real in the sense of being available, but they are not actual insofar as they cannot take action on their own. Whitehead agrees with the Aristotelian notion that to be ‘fully’ real or actual means to be able to act, and potentials cannot do this; they must be realised by something that is already an actuality.

For Bahá’ís, of course, the question that arises immediately is whether or not the Platonic Ideas or Forms have any correspondences in the Writings. There are three possible answers here. One is to infer their existence as constituents of the “First Mind”<sup>10</sup> which is active in the world, and contains these Ideas as logically necessary pre-existents to its activities. Without them, it would be acting unintelligently and unconsciously, and, therefore, imperfectly. The second is to say that the Platonic Ideas are the names of God, such as “Creator,”<sup>11</sup> the “Resuscitator”<sup>12</sup> or the “Educator”<sup>13</sup> whose activities imply all existences and processes. Third, we could combine the first two and say that the Platonic Ideas appear in the Writings as the names of

God as known by the First Mind. The last two options move the Writings in the direction of a form of process philosophy because the notions of being a Creator, Resuscitator and Educator imply activities and actions. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, a Creator who has not created or does not create is inconceivable.<sup>14</sup>

The continuity between Whiteheadian process philosophy and Aristotle will become increasingly evident throughout this paper. For now it suffices to note that Whitehead makes use of the following concepts: essence and attribute, essential and accidental attributes, the realisation of potentials, substance which he identifies with actual entities,<sup>15</sup> the nature of God and His action in the world, the correspondence theory of truth and the four-fold analysis of causality into material, efficient, formal and final causes. He also accepts the notion that entities may be understood as composites of form and substance. Naturally, Whitehead adapts some of these concepts to his own “philosophy of organism”<sup>16</sup> but the transformations are not so extreme — and in the case of essence, attribute, causality, and potential are quite minimal — that we cannot fail to recognise their connection to the Aristotelian concepts. Indeed, Whitehead, who is quite conscious of his debt to his intellectual predecessors, goes to some lengths to point out where he agrees with and diverges from Aristotle. For example, Whitehead’s notion of ‘substance’ is superficially quite different from Aristotle’s, yet not so different

that Whitehead authorities such as William Christian cannot see significant similarities.

For Bahá’ís, the issue with Aristotle is important because the Bahá’í Writings appear to confirm or share correspondences with much of Aristotle’s way of analysing reality<sup>17</sup> – which, of course, is not to say that they do not modify and/or extend the basic concepts of the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* in new directions. However, given the extent to which they confirm the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it becomes important that any philosophy claiming affinity with the Writings must be at least logically compatible with them and share certain fundamental outlooks. For example, given Aristotle’s and the Bahá’í Writings’ commitment to a correspondence theory of truth, it is difficult to see how any extreme form of scepticism could ever be compatible with the works of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi.

### Process Thought in the Bahá’í Writings: An Overview

The Bahá’í Writings contain a number of passages strongly suggesting a process world-view at both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. The foundations for the microcosmic level is set in the following quotation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

*Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose—that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either*

*coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence. So this flower, this hyacinth, during a certain period of time was coming from the world of nonexistence into being, and now it is going from being into nonexistence. This state of motion is said to be essential—that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn.*<sup>18</sup>

*Thus it is established that this movement is necessary to existence, which is either growing or declining.*<sup>19</sup>

When we examine this statement, we note, first of all, its categorical nature, as indicated by the words “nothing,” “all things,” “everything,” “necessary” and “essential.” In other words, the phenomena described is applicable to all things without exception regardless of whether they are natural or man-made. Next, we notice the flat assertion not only that all things are in motion but that “movement is necessary to existence.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the concept of ‘movement’ and ‘motion’ is not restricted to a change of physical place as indicated by the reference to growth and decline which involve changes of augmentation, complexification, actualisation, transformation, reception, causal action, synthesis, catalysis, decay and perishing. More significantly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares, “all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence.”<sup>21</sup> This change is an “essential requirement,”<sup>22</sup> that is, an

essential attribute for the thing to exist as the *kind* of thing it is, for example, fire. These statements alone qualify the Bahá'í Writings as compatible with some form of process philosophy since change or movement is regarded as an essential, absolutely necessary quality and not as an accidental or contingent attribute that may or may not be present. In short, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's declaration fully agrees with Whitehead's declaration that "the actual world is a process, and that process is the becoming of actual entities."<sup>23</sup> The process world-view embedded in the Master's statement becomes even more clear if we focus special attention on the categorical words, "all things," "everything" and "nothing" because these words allow us to apply the concept of change to the soul,<sup>24</sup> religion,<sup>25</sup> history, atoms<sup>26</sup> and sub-atomic entities, the earth,<sup>27</sup> human evolution and all its implied sub-areas as social, intellectual<sup>28</sup> ethical, political, scientific and cultural evolution.<sup>29</sup>

Strengthening the process world-view implicit in the Writings is the following statement by Bahá'u'lláh:

*Verily, the Word of God is the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world—a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times. Immeasurably exalted is the God of Wisdom Who hath raised this sublime structure.*<sup>30</sup> [emphasis added]

Again we note the categorical nature of this statement which asserts that at *all* times, that is, without exception, cre-

ation is being "renewed and regenerated."<sup>31</sup> This re-enforces the notion that change is an essential, not accidental attribute of existing things, that simple existence unavoidably involves change of some kind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá expresses a similar idea when He says, "Note thou carefully that in this world of being, all things must ever be made new,"<sup>32</sup> after which He focuses on the specific ways in which the human spiritual and cultural world has been renewed under the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh. What is especially noteworthy in this quotation is the use of the categorical "ever" which may be read as functioning like the phrase "at all times"<sup>33</sup> in the statement by Bahá'u'lláh. We also note that one of the names of God is the "Resuscitator,"<sup>34</sup> which does not necessarily imply resuscitation only at the transition from one age to the next but may also imply 'resuscitation' on a continuous basis as suggested by the other divine name, the "Sustainer."<sup>35</sup> Seen thus, we have yet other indications of a perpetually on-going process of change which reaches a crucial and decisive revolutionary peak with the arrival of a Manifestation. This subject of on-going change is also emphasised in the Writings by the references to renewal in the world.<sup>36</sup> Whereas on one level such passages may be read as referring only to the 'human world,' many of them may also, without contradiction, be read as a referring to a renewal of creation as a whole. This second reading accepts the term 'world' in the larger sense of both the natural and the human world. There are also numerous passages throughout



the Writings that refer to change or progress specifically at the atomic level.<sup>37</sup>

### Process at the Macrocosmic Level

The Writings also make clear their adherence to a process world-view at the macrocosmic level. At the most basic level this is evident in the physical evolution of the earth which is not stable but rather, as the matrix of life, has itself undergone long evolutionary development.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the Writings clearly accept the concept of evolution of all life-forms in general and human evolution in particular. In *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that human evolution is a fact and that human beings have changed outward form over time, though He rejects the notion – most specifically in the case of humankind – that species change. He explicitly rejects the claim that that human beings were once a different kind of creation.<sup>39</sup> In other words, He accepts what is sometimes called “micro-evolution,” that is evolutionary change *within* a species while rejecting “macro-evolution” (sometimes known as ‘saltation’) which is the change of one species into another.

However, the emphasis on progress found throughout the Writings makes it clear that humankind is also intended to evolve at the higher, psycho-social and spiritual levels. Bahá'u'lláh, for example, tell us that “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization”<sup>40</sup> and 'Abdu'l-Bahá promises,

“From the standpoints of both material and spiritual civilization extraordinary progress and development will be witnessed. In this present cycle there will be an evolution in civilization unparalleled in the history of the world.”<sup>41</sup> The concept of spiritual evolution cannot fail to remind us of Teilhard de Chardin’s “noogenesis,”<sup>42</sup> the “noosphere”<sup>43</sup> and the spiritual “Omega” point<sup>44</sup> towards which, according to this Jesuit paleontologist, all evolutionary developments converge. It is also obvious that progressive revelation, one of the foundations of Bahá'í theology, presents a process or evolutionary view of human intellectual and spiritual development. As circumstances change and our capacities grow, God provides guidance by means of Manifestations Whose Teachings, adapted to our better-developed intellectual and spiritual capacities, lead us forward to still higher levels of achievement and civilization.<sup>45</sup> These Manifestations arrive when human development reaches a critical juncture requiring a revolutionary infusion of divine energy in order to continue its forward motion. In the Bahá'í view, there is no end to this growth, neither for humankind collectively nor for individuals who, by virtue of being human, will continue their spiritual evolution after their physical death.

The general overview provided above shows that the Bahá'í world-view is a genuine process world-view in which no created being can escape change and development. That much established, it now remains to show how closely the Bahá'í Writings on process relate to the

philosophies espoused above all by Alfred North Whitehead — the best known and most systematic process philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century — and, to a lesser extent, by Teilhard de Chardin whose theories of human development have spread their influence beyond the Catholic world. We will find that the affinities are much closer than a first glance might suggest, especially in the case of Whitehead.

### Process at the Microcosmic Level

According to Whitehead, the most fundamental entities in the universe are “actual occasions” or “actual entities”<sup>46</sup> which come into existence, actualise their potentials or attain “satisfaction” and then perish. Each actual occasion comes into existence from a previous one from whom it inherits the entire history of the preceding line of “actual occasions”; it then perishes and bequeaths itself to its successor. Like quanta in physics, “actual occasions” exist only as discrete, discontinuous entities; we cannot have  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $1\frac{1}{2}$  “actual occasions”: the whole thing is either there or it is not. Moreover, as we shall emphasise at various times throughout in this paper, all ‘things’ or “enduring objects”<sup>47</sup> are simply the patterns made by collections or “societies” of “actual occasions” as they inter-act while passing into and out of existence. In Whitehead’s view, even an ‘atom’ is a “society” of “actual occasions,” one which seems to endure as it is because the potentiality for actualising new develop-

ments of “novelties”<sup>48</sup> is so minimal. More complex organisms such as humankind are not just “societies”<sup>49</sup> of “actual occasions” but societies of societies, co-ordinated by a ‘line’ or historical route of a dominant occasion which in human beings is called a soul. All of these “actual occasions” are being constantly renewed by God, Who, in Whitehead’s system, is not merely the Creator but also the Sustainer and the source of cosmic order.

On the subject of change at the most fundamental level, the degree of affinity between Whitehead and the Bahá'í Writings depends on how we choose to read the latter. In other words, how much similarity we see between the two depends on how we interpret ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements that “nothing which exists remains in a state of repose”<sup>50</sup> and that “all things must ever be made new”<sup>51</sup> as well as Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration that the world is being “renewed and regenerated at all times.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, He declares that the “process of His creation hath no beginning and can have no end.”<sup>53</sup> This, of course, can be read to mean that creation is a constantly on-going process, that is, constant re-creation throughout the entire universe, even among those things that already seem to have been created. If we remain at the macrocosmic level, these are simple declarations of universal mutability. However, if we choose to apply these statements at the microcosmic, atomic and sub-atomic levels, then a radical vision emerges which is startlingly similar to Whitehead’s portrayal of micro events. According to

Whitehead, it is “fundamental . . . that notion of an actual entity as the unchanging subject of change is completely abandoned.”<sup>54</sup> As asserted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, change is essential, not accidental. Furthermore, in Whitehead’s metaphysics, everything from atoms to trees, stars and humans, are made of “societies” of “actual occasions” or actual entities each of which comes into existence from a predecessor, actualises its potentials, then bequeaths its data to its own successor in whom it is “renewed and regenerated.”<sup>55</sup> To illustrate what this means, we might imagine “actual occasions” or actual entities ‘flashing’ into and out of existence, thereby creating a historic route that makes up the life history of one particular occasion.<sup>56</sup> The patterns set up by these processes constitutes the familiar, seemingly enduring entities we call ‘things’. However, because their constitutive “actual occasions” are processes, it follows that, in effect, these enduring ‘things’ too are constantly changing albeit in ways we usually find too small to notice. They, too, are flashing into and out of existence, creating thereby the patterns by which we recognise them. Neither atoms nor the larger objects of everyday life are the stable substances they appear to be for they, like everything else in creation, are being “renewed and regenerated at all times.”<sup>57</sup> Whitehead says that everyday things are a “reiteration” of a pattern formed by “actual occasions.” There is no question that he fully intends this consequence of his analysis of reality since he approvingly repeats Descartes’

claim that “endurance is nothing else than successive recreation by God.”<sup>58</sup>

In effect, Whitehead supports a theory known as continuous creation, that is, the belief that creation is never-ending, that God is always both Creator and the Sustainer<sup>59</sup> because He sustains by creating and ‘renewing and regenerating’ “at all times.”<sup>60</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us that the “creation thereof [the universe] is without beginning and without end”<sup>61</sup> and Bahá’u’lláh says, “Endeavour now to apprehend from these two traditions the mysteries of “end,” “return,” and “*creation without beginning or end.*”<sup>62</sup> If we read these statements as referring to time and not merely to endless space, then the embedded idea of continuous creation becomes evident. Moreover, reflection on the divine Name of “Creator” also suggests this conclusion. If God only created once, He would be subject to an imperfection in the present, something which cannot be. One might argue, of course, that He is creating other worlds, and this is, no doubt, the case but given the previously noted passage on renewal and regeneration, it seems equally likely that He is also manifesting His perfection and power as the ever-creating ground of all being everywhere at all times. This is suggested by the following:

*Glory be to Thee, O my God! The power of Thy might beareth me witness! I can have no doubt that should the holy breaths of Thy loving-kindness and the breeze of Thy bountiful favor cease, for less than the twinkling of an eye, to breathe over all created things, the entire creation would perish, and*

*all that are in heaven and on earth would be reduced to utter nothingness.*<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, our Whiteheadian reading of the Writings provides a metaphysical ground to such statements as the following about the loyal servant of God who will “regard the world even as a shadow that vanisheth swifter than the twinkling of an eye.”<sup>64</sup> With our understanding enriched from Whitehead’s perspective, it becomes evident that the notion of the world vanishing “swifter than the twinkling of an eye”<sup>65</sup> is not simply a metaphor but a profound metaphysical truth meant to be taken literally. It is no mere hyperbole expressing the shortness of life. It also provides a further metaphysical ground for understanding the contingency of all creation and our complete dependence on God from one moment to the next. In fact, a Whiteheadian reading adds special poignancy to all the passages alluding to the fleetingness and fragility of the world which turns out to be truer than we tend to imagine. The same may be said about references to the ‘shadowy’ or delusive character of the world: because all things are, at bottom, patterns woven by “actual occasions” instead of stable, enduring substances, statements about the tenuous nature of reality have a metaphysical not merely rhetorical basis. Finally, we are able to discern yet another reason for the wisdom of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that death should be a messenger of joy to us. We literally die and are reborn or resurrected at every moment; as beings endowed with free will, we are

given the opportunity to make ourselves new from moment to moment without ceasing. Such a metaphysic cannot help but encourage an attitude of tolerance and open-ness towards the cosmos in general and all human beings in particular.

It may be objected that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically refers to the fact that “single or simple elements are indestructible”<sup>66</sup> for which reason “atoms but are single, simple and, therefore, everlasting.”<sup>67</sup> But this does not necessarily contradict the ‘Whiteheadian’ reading provided above: because it sums up all of its predecessors and bequeaths to its successors, each actual occasion is a phase in the everlasting life-history or historical route of events that we summarise under the name of ‘atom’.<sup>68</sup> Each “actual occasion” that makes up an atom carries the entire life-history of all its ancestors within it and is, thereby, a summary of all that has gone before. Nothing has been lost and for that reason the history which, in toto is the “actual occasion” or atom, is stable and enduring. In short, we may see a particular line of constantly regenerated atomic events as one atom which lasts for all time. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is simply expressing the truth from the macrocosmic point of view but this in no way undermines His declaration that nothing is in repose or that all things are ever made new.

### The Structure of “Actual Occasions”<sup>69</sup>

According to Whitehead, all “actual occasions,” and, in effect, all enduring

entities are “dipolar,”<sup>70</sup> that is, they have a “physical”<sup>71</sup> and a “mental”<sup>72</sup> pole. To understand Whitehead’s metaphysics accurately, it is important to overcome the biases inevitably created by this highly unfortunate choice of terminology which is often taken – erroneously – to suggest that atoms, stones or tables have a mind. In the “philosophy of organism”<sup>73</sup> as Whitehead calls his metaphysics, every actual occasion is influenced by all other “actual occasions” but especially those in its vicinity. Whitehead calls this being influenced a “prehension.”<sup>74</sup> Because every actual occasion represents a distinct and unique route of development, each one receives or experiences or “feels” this influence in a slightly unique way. Herein lie the roots of distinctness and individuality at the subsequent higher levels of complexity. What all this means, according to the philosophy of organism, is that every actual occasion has a subjective side, a way of receiving influence that is uniquely its own and which belongs to it alone. In Whitehead’s view, even this extremely rudimentary subjectivity is inaccessible to any other being except God because it represents, so to speak, the inner essence of an actual entity. It is the ‘within’ which is the necessary complement of the outside or physical pole of the actual occasion which is how the actual occasion projects itself and influences other “actual occasions” in its environment. This is the objective or “physical” pole of the “actual occasion” which is how it is objectively, externally perceived or ‘prehended’ by other “actual occasions.”

For Bahá’ís, two questions arise in regard to “actual occasions.” The first concerns whether or not the Writings refer to such a concept in any way and the answer is not clear.

On one hand, the smallest entity the Writings explicitly refer to are atoms and these are not to be confused with “actual occasions” insofar as for Whitehead, an atom is a “society” of “actual occasions” and is, therefore, already quite complex. Of course, the individual members, and this “society” as a whole continuously come into and go out of being and, thereby, establish the single pattern of repetitions we call an ‘atom.’ According to this reading there is no Bahá’í concept corresponding to “actual occasion.” On the other hand, one might argue that a non-literal reading of the word ‘atom’ in the Writings as being the simplest element of reality whatever they might be does provide some room for relating them to Whitehead’s “actual occasions.” These “actual occasions” are simple, single and immortal insofar as each is carried on by its successor in a line of development that has no end. Thus they meet the requirements set for them by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.<sup>75</sup>

Another question for Bahá’ís concerns whether the Writings actually support the notion of a subjective aspect to atoms or other simple material things? The answer will depend on how one interprets the Writings and what one chooses to regard as evidence. Take, for example, the following selection of quotations:

*To this every atom of the universe beareth witness, and beyond it the inmates of the realms on high . . .*<sup>76</sup>

*. . . within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.*<sup>77</sup>

*Then will the different planes of meaning be learned, and then within every atom of the universe will be witnessed the signs of the oneness of God.*<sup>78</sup>

*. . . and the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing a door of knowledge hath been opened, and within every atom traces of the sun hath been made manifest.*<sup>79</sup>

In addition to these quotes, we might also reflect on the following:

*. . . every atom of the dust beneath their feet may attest the depth of their devotion. The conversation carried by these holy souls should be informed with such power that these same atoms of dust will be thrilled by its influence.*<sup>80</sup>

*Such is their virtue that not a single atom in the entire universe can be found which doth not declare the evidences of His might, which doth not glorify His holy Name, or is not expressive of the effulgent light of His unity . . .*<sup>81</sup>

Are these statements merely intended as rhetorical devices or poetical embellishments — or are they signposts pointing out a truth about the nature of atoms? If the latter, then we have a clear indication that, rudimentary as it might be, even

atoms have an inner, subjective aspect, or “mental pole.”<sup>82</sup> While their range of experience is limited, they do, nonetheless, reflect and express the Names of God.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, it is evident that each atom does so on its own and for itself and, in that sense, possesses a certain subjectivity and individuality. Indeed, this is true of any influence upon an atom: each atom receives and transmits or expresses external influences in its own way because each atom is at least numerically unique. Thus, nuclear science itself encourages us to accept the notion of a rudimentary subjectivity and individuality at the atomic level.<sup>84</sup> We must remember, of course, that this is not to say that such simple subjectivity is conscious; nothing in the Writings suggests that it is and Whitehead explicitly denies the doctrine that *all* experience is conscious.<sup>85</sup> For this reason it is erroneous to assume that because “actual occasions” and enduring entities have subjective experience they somehow think. In Whitehead’s view, receiving and transmitting influence to successors is not necessarily a conscious process.

Since “actual occasions” or such enduring entities as atoms are capable of perceiving and expressing the Names of God, it is permissible to claim that there is a basic agreement between the Writings and Whitehead about the functioning of the unfortunately named “mental pole.” Indeed, one might take this basic agreement further in two steps. First, according to Whitehead, the “mental pole” of an “actual occasion” ‘perceives’ what he calls “eternal objects”<sup>86</sup>

which are eternal potentials functioning like Plato's Ideas. The Writings tell us that every created thing reflects the Names and attributes of God in its own degree.<sup>87</sup> In other words, for both the Bahá'í Writings and Whitehead, all material things exist by incorporating or exemplifying qualities or ideas that are, in some sense, abstract or 'super-natural'. This means that Whitehead and the Writings share a Platonic type metaphysic in which the physically real exists by virtue of its participation in ever-lasting realities. Second, without bogging ourselves down in the details of the theory, it bears noting that each enduring object, be it an atom, a chair or a star, is constituted by the combination of "eternal objects" it receives or "prehends." That combination makes up its essence. In a similar vein, the Writings tell us that all things have the capacity to reflect the Names and attributes of God in their own degree with humankind pre-eminent among them. This capacity of whatever degree it is, constitutes their essence as the kind of entities they are. In short, Whitehead and the Writings agree on what fundamentally constitutes the essence of the things of this world.

Another significant similarity between the Writings and Whitehead is that both assert the presence of God's power in all things. 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that all things reflect the Names and attributes of God, though humankind reflects them to a pre-eminent degree among ordinary created things.<sup>88</sup> In Whitehead's view, God is always present within each thing because God provides every actual occa-

sion its initial "'subjective aim' which controls the becoming of a subject,"<sup>89</sup> that is, controls how the subject will develop. Thus, in most direct way imaginable, Whitehead's philosophy agrees with the statement that "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it."<sup>90</sup> Indeed, in Whitehead's philosophy God is also present or 'immanent' insofar as all created things feel the "lure"<sup>91</sup> of God as their "object of desire." Consequently, as Whitehead writes, "the immanence of God gives reason for the belief that pure chaos is intrinsically impossible."<sup>92</sup> The universe, in other words, possesses an inherent order and is not simply a chaotic aggregate functioning by chance.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that "Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart."<sup>94</sup>

### Self-Actualisation

Process philosophy and the Writings also agree that the particular kind of becoming an actual entity undergoes is the self-actualisation of its potentials; as Whitehead puts it, "Self-realization is the ultimate fact of facts. And actuality is self-realizing and whatever is self-realizing is an actuality."<sup>95</sup> All other kinds of change are, in the last analysis, only aspects or phases in the process of this kind of change. What it realises or actualises are the potentials it inherits from its immediate ancestors which it will

develop within the parameters allowed by the kind of thing it is and with the appropriate degree of freedom and creativity. Having successfully self-actualised or attained “satisfaction,”<sup>96</sup> it then perishes, that is, bequeaths its actualised self as the data from which, with God’s action, a new actual entity emerges.<sup>97</sup> This new entity includes the essential data from its predecessor. In the Writings, the concept of actualising potentials is central, since the whole purpose of the physical sun or the spiritual Sun is to bring hidden and latent potentialities into fruition.<sup>98</sup> Thus, while there is no explicit agreement, there is at least logically compatibility between the Writings and Whitehead’s assertion that an actual entity goes through four stages of development, namely a “datum”<sup>99</sup> or what is inherited; a process of self-actualisation in accordance with the divinely provided “subjective aim”; actualisation or “satisfaction” and “decision,”<sup>100</sup> or how the actual entity adds itself to the “future beyond itself.”<sup>101</sup> Whitehead’s work simply provides a detailed examination of the details of a process that both agree is essential to all that exists.

### An Interlude on Freedom, Novelty and Responsibility

One might, at this point, discern a possible conflict between the Bahá'í Writings and Whitehead over the issue of freedom. According to the “philosophy of organism,” all “actual occasions” possess a certain amount of freedom in the actualisation of their God-given sub-

jective aim.<sup>102</sup> This must *not* be misunderstood to mean that they exercise a conscious or deliberative freedom of choice; rather it means that within the bounds of its essential nature and the laws of nature, an actual occasion – or an atom – confronts a range of possibilities for development. It is impossible to predict which of these possibilities a specific actual occasion will realise. That is why, at the quantum level of reality, we must use probability calculations in making predictions about the behaviour of large numbers of sub-atomic entities. We are able to predict what an average number of them will do, but we cannot predict the ‘choices’ made by any specific individual entities. Even under the same influence they do not all necessarily react in the same way because various innate differences make them susceptible to nature’s laws in different ways. Stated in more ‘Whiteheadian’ terms, each “actual occasion” (or atom) has its own peculiar history which makes it particularly sensitive or insensitive to certain influences<sup>103</sup> and which is the basis of that diversity of unpredictable action we call ‘freedom’.

Closely related to freedom is the notion of “novelty,”<sup>104</sup> that is, the phenomenon of unpredictable newness or divergence from usual action. Novelty means that an actual entity actualises hitherto unseen and unexpected potentials that are the products of its individual life route and/or its interaction with its context. According to Whitehead, all “actual occasions” have at least the potential to exhibit novelty or creativity



albeit always within the bounds of their essences and of natural law. Within these limits, a certain amount of freedom, novelty and creativity is found even at the level of “actual occasions” and societies of “actual occasions” such as atoms. If — and only if — we do not misunderstand or exaggerate Whitehead’s claims on these issues there is no conflict with the Bahá’í Writings because Whitehead’s philosophy makes no claims about breaking natural laws and the limits established by an “actual occasion’s” nature or essence. Moreover, it outrightly repudiates the notion of consciousness at this level. There is no question that *Process and Reality* goes into far more detail than the Writings do, but there is no fundamental incompatibility between them because of that.

Finally, it must be noted that because they have a certain amount of freedom, all “actual occasions” and all societies thereof bear some responsibility for the kind of thing they have become, though of course, in the case of an atom that degree of responsibility is negligibly small. However, it is essential at this point to allow for Whitehead’s distinction between responsibility and culpability. An “actual occasion” is responsible for what it becomes and bequeaths to its descendants simply because it is part of a route of development but it is not morally culpable in the sense of having consciously willed a certain outcome. Thus, the roots of responsibility and what eventually becomes culpability in conscious beings extend into the deepest structures of the cosmos.

### Atoms, “Actual Occasions” and the “Philosophy of Organism”

At this point, the question arises whether or not the Bahá’í Writings sanction endowing primitive entities, be they “actual occasions” or atoms, with the kind of powers of self-realisation discussed above. It is, after all, one thing to show that the Writings and Whitehead are not contradictory or even complementary and quite another to show that the Writings directly support Whitehead’s claims. I believe it possible to show that the latter is the case. Take, for example, the following quotation:

*Therefore, each atom of the innumerable elemental atoms, during its ceaseless motion through the kingdoms of existence as a constituent of organic composition, not only becomes imbued with the powers and virtues of the kingdoms it traverses but also reflects the attributes and qualities of the forms and organisms of those kingdoms. As each of these forms has its individual and particular virtue, therefore, each elemental atom of the universe has the opportunity of expressing an infinite variety of those individual virtues. No atom is bereft or deprived of this opportunity or right of expression. . . . It is evident, then, that each elemental atom of the universe is possessed of a capacity to express all the virtues of the universe. . . . From this point of view and perception pantheism is a truth, for every atom in the universe possesses or reflects all the virtues of life, the manifestation of which is effected*

*through change and transformation.*<sup>105</sup> [emphases added]

This passage says that an atom has the ability or potential to *acquire and express* the virtues, the “attributes and qualities”<sup>106</sup> of the kingdom into which it has been transferred during the course of its existence. These include, in potential, “all the virtues of life”<sup>107</sup> which are manifested, that is, made evident and active, “through change and transformation.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, an atom is not simply a dead lump of stuff and nothing more; rather, it is a context-sensitive and context-responsive complex of potentials to be actualised in the appropriate circumstances. In short, within the bounds of their essences and natural law, atoms — like Whitehead’s “actual occasions” — are able to respond appropriately to their contexts and, by extension, express new virtues in new contexts. As Whitehead puts it,

*The concrete enduring entities are organisms, so that the plan of the whole influences the very characters of the various subordinate organisms which enter into it . . . Thus an electron within a living body is different from an electron outside it, by reason of the plan of the body. The electron blindly runs either within or without the body; but it runs within the body in accordance with its character within the body.*<sup>109</sup>

In other words, atoms and “actual occasions” are capable of responding flexibly to their environments; they are able to adapt by actualising the appropriate attributes as necessary. Such an

ability suggests that in new, never-before-seen contexts, they will be able to express wholly new responses. This, in turn, supports the notion that they are capable of at least minimal freedom and creativity. According to Whitehead, the possession of such responsive and creative flexibility is one of the criteria of living things,<sup>110</sup> which is why for him, there is no clear dividing line between the living and non-living. Insofar as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “*every atom in the universe possesses or reflects all the virtues of life*”<sup>111</sup> at least in potential, He would seem to agree with Whitehead’s view.

The belief that an actual occasion can make itself an integral part of its context by expressing the virtues of that context is one of the foundation stones of Whitehead’s “philosophy of organism.”<sup>112</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests the same idea when He tells us that “each elemental atom of the universe is possessed of a capacity to express all the virtues of the universe.”<sup>113</sup> What we see at work in both cases is the concept of an integral, mutually reflective relationship between whole and parts, which for Whitehead is the sine qua non of organic unity as distinct from mechanical unity. In the former, parts and whole show internal relationships, whereas in the latter, the relationships between parts and whole are external, as in for example an automobile engine.

Organic unity requires ‘mutual immanence.’ In some sense or other, this community of actualities of the world means that each happening is a factor in the nature of every other happening.<sup>114</sup>

Of course, the Bahá'í Writings do not embark on a detailed exploration of this issue, but, as we can see from the foregoing quotations, the principle of organic unity is firmly established even at the atomic level. This idea is further reinforced by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's declaration that

*all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association.*<sup>115</sup>

Directly or indirectly, all beings are connected and influence each other; they are involved in a web of mutual cosmic influences and interactions that join them in the same way that the constituents of an organism are joined and in communication. In short, the universe is an organic and not mechanical unity because it functions like a unified organism. From this it follows that we cannot understand any event or actual occasion in isolation from its cosmic context, something that Whitehead makes clear when he writes, "no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe."<sup>116</sup> Although the Writings do not explicitly agree to this notion, it is an inescapable logical consequence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "all beings are connected together like a chain."<sup>117</sup>

Whitehead supports his claim that the

universe is an organism by pointing out that it has an ultimate subjective aim<sup>118</sup> provided for it by its dominant actual occasion, God, Who co-ordinates its activities in order to achieve a universal intensification of experience. This intensification can only be achieved if all things actualise their potentials to the maximum degree possible within the bounds of their essences and natural law. In effect, this is what transpires in evolution. According to Whitehead, God achieves this goal not by coercion but rather by persuasion,<sup>119</sup> by being the "object of desire"<sup>120</sup> towards which entities strive. "He is the lure of feeling, the eternal urge of desire. His particular relevance to each creative act . . . constitutes him the initial 'object of desire' establishing the initial phase of each subjective aim."<sup>121</sup>

These ideas are strongly reminiscent of what we find in the Bahá'í Writings which also posit a universal subjective aim reflected in all entities, namely, the desire to return as close as possible to God. The nature or essence of each entity is constituted by the manner in which it engages in the process of achieving this subjective aim. Just as in Whitehead, God is the "object of desire"<sup>122</sup> or "lure"<sup>123</sup> for all things, an idea which the Writings reflect in four ways. First, it is implicitly present in references to God as "the Object of the adoration of the entire creation!"<sup>124</sup> Second, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá: God, Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat

that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Third, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the ultimate goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Fourth, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "God has created all and all return to God."<sup>125</sup>

### Causality and Self-Actualisation

This agreement between Whitehead and the Writings becomes even broader when we note that, like the Writings, Whitehead agrees to the Aristotelian concept of final causation<sup>126</sup> as vital to understanding how an actual entity develops, be it a chair or an atom. "Process is the growth and attainment of a final end."<sup>127</sup> He then adds, "final causation expresses the internal process

whereby the actual entity becomes itself."<sup>128</sup> It is the goal towards which the actual entity strives. According to the Bahá'í Writings, for human beings, this process of self-actualisation is so important that it does not even stop at physical death but continues for all eternity at the spiritual level.<sup>129</sup> This means that in the Bahá'í Writings and in the philosophy of organism all entities, albeit many to a minimal degree, are goal-oriented, seek self-actualisation and are, therefore, teleological in nature. This goal defines them as the kind of entities they are, or, as Whitehead says, "The ideal, itself felt, defines what 'self' will arise from the datum."<sup>130</sup> Because every actual entity develops itself into the kind of thing it becomes, it is, in Whitehead's view, *causa sui*.<sup>131</sup> It creates itself not from nothing but rather develops itself from its God-given subjective aim and the data provided by the preceding actual occasion.

### The Implications of Causality

Not only do Whitehead and the Writings agree on the existence of final causes, they also agree on efficient causes.<sup>132</sup> According to Whitehead, "efficient causation expresses the transition from actual entity to actual entity."<sup>133</sup> In other words, as in Aristotle, efficient causality is the means by which one thing acts on another in some way, whether it be to hammer a nail or to provide data for further development or action.<sup>134</sup> This is significant for two reasons. First, the acceptance of efficient causation reveals another area of agreement

between Whitehead and the Writings, namely, the fact of causality, an issue that has been of some philosophical dispute since Hume. The Scottish philosopher notwithstanding, Bahá'u'lláh tells us "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."<sup>135</sup> This agreement is of enormous philosophical significance because it establishes the groundwork for the First Mover argument for God's existence which both the Writings<sup>136</sup> and Whitehead accept, the latter in the form of God as "the principle of concretion."<sup>137</sup>

The acceptance of efficient and final causality is of great philosophical significance. This becomes clear when we comprehend that by accepting final causality, Whitehead, like the Writings, has also at least implicitly accepted formal causality.<sup>138</sup> An entity cannot be struggling to achieve a final cause without having a particular form engaged in that struggle. Its form is part of what it needs to develop its potentials. Moreover, by accepting efficient causality, Whitehead, like the Bahá'í Writings,<sup>139</sup> also accepts the Aristotelian notion of material causality though 'material' must not be misconstrued as being 'physical'. For example, ideas are the material from which this essay is made as I work — exert efficient causality — to provide it with a coherent form to achieve my envisaged end of a final presentation. 'Matter' in this context simply means something that is to be given form. In other words, both the Writings and Whitehead accept Aristotle's four-fold analysis of causality. This is extra-ordinarily important

because it means that they envisage a natural world in ways sufficiently similar to allow it to be subjected to the same kind of causal analysis. Both of them implicitly agree on the nature of the physical universe, a fact whose importance grows when we recall that Whitehead explicitly formulated his philosophy to be compatible with and in harmony with quantum theory. This means that a Whiteheadian reading of the Bahá'í Writings allows us to specifically identify an area in which there is harmony between religion and science on an absolutely fundamental issue for modern physics.

### Causality and the Proof of God

Having accepted, like the Bahá'í Writings, an Aristotelian analysis of causality, Whitehead also accepts the resulting argument for the existence of God as the First Mover or, as he prefers to call Him, "the Principle of Concretion."<sup>140</sup> For reasons that will be clearer by the end of this paper, he says that we must accept the Aristotelian argument in a new form because his and Aristotle's metaphysics are "similar"<sup>141</sup> and lead to problems requiring similar solutions. In a nutshell, his argument runs as follows: all existent things are individuals and individualisation requires limitation or borders imposed on 'matter' or the universal process. A thing cannot bring itself into existence because to do so would be to order itself before it exists. Since this is impossible, God is required as a 'limiter' Whose actions create a 'concrete' individual entity of some

kind. Hence, God is the “Principle of Concretion.”<sup>142</sup> For His part, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms the validity of Aristotle’s First Mover proof for God’s existence:

*... we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exists under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences ... Such a process of causation goes, and to maintain that this process goes on indefinitely is manifestly absurd. Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to Him Who is the Ever-Living, the All Powerful, Who is Self-Dependent and the Ultimate Cause.*<sup>143</sup>

Regarding the nature of the physical universe, there is yet another fundamental similarity between the Bahá'í Writings and Whitehead, namely, the rejection of the notion that something can ever come from nothing. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us that “absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. If the beings were absolutely nonexistent, existence would not have come into being.”<sup>144</sup> In other words, everything needs a preceding entity to cause it — which cause ultimately is God. Whitehead concurs: “According to the ontological principle there is nothing which floats into the world from nowhere. Everything in the actual world is referable to some actual entity”;<sup>145</sup> indeed, being defined as an entity means simply to be able to cause an effect on another actual entity.

## Whitehead’s Theory of God

God is an integral part of Whitehead’s cosmology not because of any pre-existing beliefs or religious commitments but because God is a logically necessary part of any complete and adequate description of the universe and its operations. He believes that we cannot devise a scientifically and logically satisfactory explanation of the cosmos without in some way, directly or by implication, invoking a supreme being. On this point he is in complete agreement with the Writings because they too hold that no explanation of the universe can be adequate without reference to God. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes, a complete causal explanation of any reality must include a final cause<sup>146</sup> from which it follows that as the Prime Mover of the universe, God is the final cause of creation. The full explanation of any actual occasion leads ultimately to God, which is precisely Whitehead’s view insofar as God provides each and every actual occasion with the initial subjective aim without which it could not develop.

That said, two points must be noted immediately. First, God as envisioned by Whitehead is not the God of any particular religion but rather a ‘philosopher’s God’ whose attributes are known by empirical experience and logical deduction, not by divine revelation through Manifestations. We shall deal with this issue in more detail later. Second, Whitehead’s theory of God is the least developed aspect of his philosophy and, perhaps for that reason, subject to more

interpretation and controversy than any other part. Primarily through such thinkers as Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, it has sparked the development of "process theology," which, especially in the case of Hartshorne, has led to radical conception of an 'evolving God' Who, in some ways, is relative and not absolute in the so-called 'classical' manner.<sup>147</sup>

The root of the controversy lies in Whitehead's concept of the two aspects of God, which he refers to as God's "primordial nature"<sup>148</sup> and His "consequent nature."<sup>149</sup> This is not, as some might think, a division of God into two or a belief in two gods. Rather, this concept refers to the two main ways in which human beings are forced by logic and experience to think about God despite the inevitable inadequacy of such thinking. The distinction between these two aspects of God is "a distinction of reason,"<sup>150</sup> that is, a distinction that can be made mentally but does not indicate actual separability. The form and content of a poem are a common example of such a distinction; the two can be thought about and treated as distinct, but in the poem itself, they are never separate but rather two aspects of the complete work. Together they make the whole. The same is true of Whitehead's concept of God, for which reason readers must be extremely careful not to jump to conclusions about one aspect or the other in isolation.

According to Whitehead, "viewed as primordial, [God] is the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute

wealth of potentiality."<sup>151</sup> This is similar to the Writings' claim that God is the "all-knowing"<sup>152</sup> or "omniscient"<sup>153</sup> insofar as He not merely has but *is* the conceptual knowledge of all potentials and all potential beings, or "actual occasions."<sup>154</sup> Because of His conceptual knowledge of all possible beings, God provides the ground of being to all possible entities, or, as Whitehead puts it in his own peculiar-sounding terminology, God "is the unconditioned actuality of conceptual feeling at the base of things."<sup>155</sup> For Whitehead, when God is seen in "abstraction,"<sup>156</sup> that is, seen in isolation from His consequent nature, He is "deficiently actual,"<sup>157</sup> which means that the knowledge possessed by God is "only conceptual and so lack[s] the fulness [sic] of actuality."<sup>158</sup> God's primordial nature only knows possibilities whereas actualities are known by His consequent nature. In His primordial aspect, God's conceptual operations are entirely free creative acts because these operations are not yet limited or constrained by the nature or essence of any previously created actualities. In Whitehead's view, God's primordial or "conceptual nature"<sup>159</sup> is also changeless and immutable because of its "final completeness"<sup>160</sup> and because it 'contains' no actual entities which can take any action to which God might respond. Because all possibilities that might unfold through time are already inherent in it, God's primordial nature is also complete, timeless and utterly transcendent to all created things. It is also "infinite [and] devoid of negative prehensions"<sup>161</sup> which means

that God, in His primordial nature, excludes nothing that could possibly be. In this aspect, God is completely free, as well as independent of all things which obviously depend on Him for their potentiality to be known, and thereby, to exist as possibilities. God, in His primordial aspect, is 'eminently' real, that is, more real than any of the potentials because He is actual. However, *viewed in isolation*, God's primordial nature suffers three major deficiencies: it is unconscious because, in Whitehead's view, consciousness can only be the consciousness of "actual occasions" and not merely possibilities. Moreover, it is "actually deficient"<sup>162</sup> because this aspect of God has not created any actualities. Finally, it has no personal nature or personality.

God's other aspect, according to Whitehead, is His "consequent nature"<sup>163</sup> wherein He is "the end and the beginning"<sup>164</sup> insofar as He is final cause that is established in the subjective aim of every actual occasion and the "lure"<sup>165</sup> that draws it on in its evolution. This also makes God immanent because His power and creativity are present in all things. In His consequent nature, God creates the world "in the unity of his nature, and through the transformation of his wisdom"<sup>166</sup> and responds to the cosmos He has created. Such a response requires consciousness because it concerns the "actual occasions" that God has brought out of potentiality into actual existence or, as the Writings say, "called into being."<sup>167</sup> The consequent nature feels the world "in a union of immediacy,"<sup>168</sup> which

allows it to perceive "every actuality for what it can be in such a perfected system — its sufferings, its sorrows, its failures, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy . . ." <sup>169</sup> This aspect of God is associated with "infinite patience,"<sup>170</sup> harmony, love and the preservation of all "actual occasions" in a manner appropriate to their nature.<sup>171</sup> In this aspect God is not only a personality but, for Whitehead, above all, "the great companion — the fellow-sufferer who understands."<sup>172</sup> Because in his consequent nature, God responds to His creation, He must, in some sense be amenable to change.

Initial reflection upon Whitehead's doctrine of God's primordial and consequent natures reveals that they seem to contradict themselves on some issues. For example, the primordial nature is immutable, but the consequent nature is not since it responds to "actual occasions." Furthermore, the primordial nature is unconscious, non-personal and transcendent whereas the consequent nature is conscious, personal and immanent through its actions. One way of resolving this conflict is to declare that because God's nature is beyond human understanding, this admittedly self-contradictory description of God is the best we can do and that the conflict between the descriptions reflects the shortcomings of our understanding and not any bifurcation or contradiction in God. Moreover, in a sense, the conflict is a mirage since the primordial nature is a description of God from the *point of view of the abstract intellect* while the consequent nature is a description from



*the viewpoint of our existential, historical and emotional experience.* Different viewpoints yield different descriptions. The two viewpoints are not contradictory but rather complementary, necessitated by the inherent limits of our ability to know God. They reflect no inherent limitation in God Himself Whose final truth is beyond human comprehension.

However, resolving an apparent conflict within Whitehead's thought does nothing to resolve a serious difficulty with the Bahá'í Writings which categorically assert that God is utterly immutable and impervious to change.<sup>173</sup> Yet this Teaching presents its own puzzle to Bahá'ís. If God is immutable in the sense of being completely unresponsive to creation, what is the point of prayer, especially petitionary prayer? How can Bahá'u'lláh assure us that "He is wont to answer the prayers of all men"?<sup>174</sup> How can we be told that "God will answer anyone"?<sup>175</sup> or that we should "[p]ray to be forgiven"?<sup>176</sup> How could 'Abdu'l-Bahá promise that he will "pray that the Almighty will succour those holy souls with His Invisible hosts"?<sup>177</sup> If God answers our prayers then there is a 'before' when we had not yet prayed and He had not yet responded and an 'after' when these actions were taken. This seems to suggest — in blatant self-contradiction to other Writings — that there is change of some kind in God. The easiest way to resolve this difficulty is to adopt the Bahá'í belief that God is timeless; creaturely concepts such as 'before' and 'after' simply do not apply to Him. Consequently, there is no contradiction

in saying that God changes in response to prayer and that He is immutable inasmuch as these concepts are meaningful only in reference to time from which God is exempt. In some way, God is able to reconcile responsiveness with immutability. What seems like a contradiction *from the human point of view* is not, therefore, a contradiction from God's point of view; rather, the apparent contradiction is merely a reflection of our human epistemological limits and not any reflection on the nature of God Himself.

From a Whiteheadian perspective, it is also possible to argue that statements about God's immutability refer to God's primordial nature and statements about petitionary prayer refer to God's consequent nature. Because they refer to different aspects of God, they are not contradictory but complementary. However, what matters most is that we do not lose sight of the fact that if we take Whitehead's vision of God *as a whole* — as, indeed, we should lest we inadvertently lapse into the polytheism he rejects — we encounter a Being Who is eternal, all-knowing, immutable, creative, free, compassionate and responsive, the "object of desire," complete, personal, all inclusive, independent (self-subsisting), transcendent, timeless and universally present and active. Furthermore, God is essentially unknowable insofar as He cannot be explained in causal terms, which is to say, cannot be explained at all; rather, God is the basis from Whom ultimately, all other explanations are derived. "The given course of history

presupposes his primordial nature, but his primordial nature does not presuppose it.”<sup>178</sup> In other words, God is not causally dependent on the history of the cosmic process. These characterisations of God do not differ from the Bahá'í Writings in any significant respect.

### God's Exceptionalism

Notwithstanding Whitehead's attempt to make God the exemplar of “metaphysical principles,”<sup>179</sup> that is, the origin and primary model of cosmic order and not an exceptional Being, Whitehead's description of God's attributes clearly shows that he did not succeed in this goal. Although God shares some attributes with “actual occasions,” He differs from them in so many significant respects that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that there is a “categorical difference”<sup>180</sup> between Him and the rest of creation. Unlike other “actual occasions,” God has no origin in time,<sup>181</sup> that is, He has no beginning and no end, and this alone makes Him different *in kind* from other “actual occasions” all of which have definite starting points and endings. Furthermore, among “actual occasions,” only God envisages *all* possibilities<sup>182</sup> and, therefore, His conceptual experience and knowledge have no limits in space or time, which is to say, He is “all-knowing.”<sup>183</sup> Because His envisagement is non-temporal, He cannot ‘develop in time,’ that is, He cannot actualise any potentials since, in Whitehead's system, actualisation involves the *sequential* envisagement of possibilities. From this

it follows that God does not attain satisfaction of His subjective aims in the same manner as other “actual occasions.” In Whitehead's terms, the divine satisfaction would consist of one continuous “complex integral feeling”<sup>184</sup> which is free of all disharmonies. In other words, God is unified, or “one.” Furthermore, unlike other “actual occasions” no matter how sophisticated, God is able to ‘prehend’ or know every actual occasion from the viewpoint of its own subjective aim. Here, too, God has privileged knowledge. He is also an exception by being the final cause of all “actual occasions” instead of simply the final cause in a single line of development. Finally, God is the only actual entity to possess a primordial and consequent nature.

This survey of some of the major differences between God and other “actual occasions” makes a strong case for concluding that, intentions to the contrary, Whitehead's God is not just an actual occasion like all the others. He is clearly different not just in degree but in kind. Indeed, from a Bahá'í perspective, Whitehead's vision God may not be different enough because He still shares some attributes with the created “actual occasions.” This would appear to contradict Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that “no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute.”<sup>185</sup> However, the contradiction is not genuine because Bahá'u'lláh's statement refers to God's Essence which is completely unlike anything else, and, therefore, unknowable, whereas created things may resemble the

divine attributes as revealed by the Manifestation. We cannot know God in Himself, but, through the Manifestation, we can, at least analogically,<sup>186</sup> know some of His attributes. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "as things can only be known by their qualities and not by their essence, it is certain that the Divine Reality is unknown with regard to its essence and is *known with regard to its attributes*."<sup>187</sup> For example, one of God's attributes is creativity — He is, after all, the Creator — but unless that word bears at least some analogical resemblance to what humans understand by 'creativity,' nothing the Manifestation says about it would be meaningful to us.<sup>188</sup>

From a Bahá'í perspective, a similar solution can be used to explain the similarities between God and other "actual occasions" in Whitehead's philosophy. In the first place, these similarities refer only to God's attributes and not to God Himself, and, in the second place, they refer to God's attributes analogically and not univocally. On the basis of evidence already presented, it is possible to argue that given the enormous differences between God and all other "actual occasions," similarities between God's attributes and "actual occasions" can at best be analogical. While Whitehead does not make this point explicitly, such a view would be in keeping with his belief that God is beyond all causal explanation and understanding.

## Manifestations

Although there is nothing in the philos-

ophy of Whitehead to suggest the existence of Manifestations of God, the existence of such a Being is not excluded by his metaphysical system. Indeed, his system allows us to devise an almost naturalistic explanation of Manifestations that coincides remarkably with the Bahá'í teachings.<sup>189</sup> It would run as follows. According to Whitehead, there is a particular process which characterises all natural entities: God establishes each "actual occasion" with its unique initial subjective aim, this aim develops, attains satisfaction, perishes and bequeaths its data to the next actual occasion which has its own subjective aim and will use the inherited data appropriately.<sup>190</sup> By establishing the initial subjective aim of each "actual occasion," God continuously intervenes not just in natural processes but also in history. Thus it is well within the framework of Whitehead's thought for God to establish a particular "actual occasion" with the special initial subjective aim of revealing or reflecting God's attributes and will to creatures whose capacities are limited in this regard. This special "actual occasion" and its successors constitute a unique society of "actual occasions" functioning as a single 'life-route' that appears at critical junctures in human evolution. To Bahá'ís, the various historical appearances made by this special society at different points in its 'life-route' are known as the Manifestations of God, all of Whom — outward aspects notwithstanding — are equal. Bahá'u'lláh says they are "but one person, one soul, one spirit, one being, one revelation."<sup>191</sup>

## The Correspondence Theory of Truth

The Bahá'í Writings and Whitehead agree on a correspondence theory of truth. As Whitehead says, "[t]ruth is the conformation of Appearance to Reality"<sup>192</sup> to which he adds, "A proposition is true when the nexus [relationships] does in reality exemplify the pattern which is the predicate of the proposition."<sup>193</sup> Truth is found when human perception corresponds to what is really there. This means that human beings discover the already existing truth about things and *do not construct it*; reality is given by God and not made by us. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and *comprehendeth* universal principles,"<sup>194</sup> an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."<sup>195</sup>

*The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelli-*

*gence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.*<sup>196</sup>

This allegiance to a correspondence theory of truth has enormous significance because it means that both the Bahá'í Writings and Whitehead espouse metaphysical realism, a position that asserts that the world is really independent of human perception and conception. Once again, the idea that we somehow 'construct' reality – as distinct from interpretations or conceptions of it – is completely denied. "We can, therefore, intelligibly affirm the existence of a real world to which our ideas [conceptions, constructs, interpretations] may or may not correspond."<sup>197</sup>

The question remains, do the Bahá'í Writings support a 'naïve realism,' that is, do they maintain that the world exists exactly as it appears to sensory perception? For reasons we need not explore here, Whitehead rejects naïve realism<sup>198</sup> and it seems clear that the Bahá'í Writings do as well, not because we construct reality in any way but because what is revealed by sensory perception is simply not all there is. Reality has many aspects and 'worlds,' not all of which can

be known by sensational knowledge. Such knowledge is, for example, provided by revelation whose truth — often known only in the heart — has no sensory basis whatever. Indeed, although they do not go into this subject in any depth, the Writings would support Whitehead's attack on all sensationalistic theories of knowledge<sup>199</sup> as utterly inadequate to explain some of the simplest facts of human existence such as memory. A memory is not a sensation yet it is as clearly known as any sensation can be.

### Substance and Essence

Because Whitehead's thought is a process philosophy, it is natural to question its compatibility with the Writings which make considerable use of the concept of substance in its philosophical sense. The following quotation is a typical example:

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.<sup>200</sup>

It may be objected that a 'process philosophy' and a 'substance philosophy' are inherently incompatible. However, such is not necessarily the case. Whitehead does not so much reject the notion of substance as reform it because he does not, as first impressions may mislead us to think, reject the notion of perma-

nence; "[f]or Whitehead permanence is one of the fundamental characteristics of the world."<sup>201</sup> We need both permanence and flux to explain reality so it is not a question of eliminating one or the other but rather of explaining one — in this case, permanence — in terms of the other. This we have already seen in the discussion of repetition of patterns by the 'life-history' of "actual occasions." Such repetition provides the endurance and permanence which is otherwise explained by the traditional notion of substance.

William Christian, in his classic *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*, writes, "Whitehead says, 'The notion of substance is *transformed* into that of 'actual entity.'"<sup>202</sup> In other words, the role of substance as the basis for endurance is now played by the "actual occasion" whose patterns of development and action — coming into being, actualising and achieving satisfaction, perishing and providing data for successors — constitute what we perceive as enduring or permanent. The "actual occasions" do not endure but the 'life-history' which is preserved in each successor and the patterns of development they collectively display in an evolutionary line do, in fact, persist. This persistence is exactly what the original notion of substance was intended to explain.

When we recall that the notion of 'substance' is also traditionally used to explain the individuality of things, it becomes apparent how this concept is related to that of 'essence'. "Actual occasions" develop in patterns or repetitions

which must have identifying characteristics or attributes which make them the particular kind of patterns and individual patterns they are and which allow us to recognise them at different times. In short, they have an 'essence,' a complex of attributes that identify them as what they are and distinguish them from other classes or kinds. Furthermore, individuality can only be established by possessing attributes that differentiate a thing from others in its class, just as its class is differentiated from other classes by a particular set of attributes. In each case, such attributes make up the 'essence' of a thing, both as an individual and as a member of a class, possessing as it does a class essence within which the individuating attributes are found. From this analysis, it is clearly evident that process philosophy does not negate a 'substance-attribute' analysis of reality such as we find in the Bahá'í Writings.<sup>203</sup>

### Immortality of the Soul

One of the key teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is the immortality of the soul; indeed, its notion of the soul's progress after death is the logical outgrowth of its evolutionary view of all existence. Although Whitehead makes no explicit commitments to the immortality of the soul, he recognises that his system leaves room for that concept.

How far this soul finds a support for its existence beyond the body is another question. The everlasting nature of God... may establish with the soul a peculiarly intense relationship of mutual imma-

nence. Thus in some important respect the existence of the soul may be freed from its complete dependence on bodily organization.<sup>204</sup>

However, there was really no need for Whitehead to be so diffident about this issue since his own philosophy provides clear logical reasons to believe in the immortality of the human soul. According to him, souls are "actual occasions" or actual entities<sup>205</sup> or, as he puts it elsewhere, "high-grade occasions"<sup>206</sup> which dominate and co-ordinate the personal society of "actual occasions" that we call a 'person'. He identifies this with the "soul of which Plato spoke."<sup>207</sup>

The bottom line in Whitehead's system is that there is no inherent logical reason why any 'life-route' of such "actual occasions" should necessarily pass out of existence instead of being transformed in other contexts. Thus, from within the philosophy of organism, there can be no logical objection to the claim that some societies of "actual occasions" with peculiarly human subjective aims and consequent 'life-routes' maintain their individual consciousness even when no longer associated with or 'prehending' another group of "actual occasions" with certain physical attributes, such as a brain.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, since these special "actual occasions" continue their 'life-route,' it is likely that they will develop and transform in new contexts. In short, Whitehead's philosophy provides a naturalistic, scientifically viable way of explaining the Bahá'í belief about immortality and our personal evolution

in the future.

## The Bahá'í Writings and Teilhard de Chardin

Whereas Whitehead's approach to process philosophy is rooted in his speciality as a logician and mathematician, Teilhard de Chardin's approach is based on his work as a palaeontologist. Indeed, even if he had never written any of his philosophical works, he would still have his place in the history of human palaeontology as a co-discoverer of Peking Man in China. However, it was precisely his palaeontological work that inspired his philosophical reflections about the nature of the universe, about evolution as a cosmic phenomenon and about human evolution in particular. This led him to conclusions that both resemble certain Bahá'í teachings on some points and complement them on others.

## Matter and Process

Like the Bahá'í Writings<sup>209</sup> and Whitehead, de Chardin holds that the universe is in ceaseless transformation, thereby clearly aligning himself against the "immobilists"<sup>210</sup> who profess a static view of creation. For de Chardin, it is axiomatic that matter is constantly changing, that "from its most distant formulations matter reveals itself to us in a state of genesis or becoming . . ."<sup>211</sup> In his "Hymn to Matter," he describes matter as the "reality ever new-born."<sup>212</sup> This is a poetic way of suggesting that

matter is continuously evolving, somehow being re-continuously re-created in new forms which "shatter our mental categories, [and] force us to go ever further and further in pursuit of the truth."<sup>213</sup> There is always something new to discover about matter because it is ceaselessly actualising new previously hidden potentials or "dormant seeds."<sup>214</sup> He exclaims, "You I acclaim as the inexhaustible potentiality for existence and transformation . . ."<sup>215</sup> and later sums up his entire outlook succinctly by saying, "The world is a-building."<sup>216</sup> Moreover, like the Writings, he believes that matter exhibits a "pre-life,"<sup>217</sup> which is a potentiality to express life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá alludes to a similar idea when he says, "From this point of view and perception pantheism is a truth, *for every atom in the universe possesses or reflects all the virtues of life.*"<sup>218</sup> He makes this point in more general terms as well, saying that "each elemental atom of the universe is possessed of a capacity to express all the virtues of the universe"<sup>219</sup> and is able, therefore, to express all the virtues of the particular kingdom of which it may be a part. The concept that in their own degree and capacity, even atoms reflect the Names and signs of God suggests that they have potentials that are not necessarily obvious.<sup>220</sup> Given such vast potentials, it follows, as de Chardin says, "life is not a peculiar anomaly, sporadically flowering on matter — but an exaggeration, through specially favourable circumstances, of a universal cosmic property."<sup>221</sup> This makes clear not only that matter possesses at least the potentiality

to express life, but also that life is no mere accidental epiphenomenon but rather an essential and, thereby, inevitable actualisation of a universal latency. The production of life is an essential consequence of the cosmic process for which reason, the notion that the arrival of life is a fortuitous accident is a fundamental misunderstanding which science, and especially biology, must overcome.<sup>222</sup> The Writings lend support to this view by declaring,

*it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.*<sup>223</sup>

In other words, the potentiality for “innumerable beings” including life was already present in the matter of the terrestrial globe and required only the right conditions to actualise. This suggests that the development of life was inevitable as global conditions changed and new potentials were realised.

Although neither the Bahá'í Writings nor de Chardin see matter as the highest level of existence as materialists do, they are both quite willing to take a ‘noble view’ of matter as a sign of God’s power. As Bahá'u'lláh tells us,

*Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every*

*atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.*<sup>224</sup>

If atoms were wholly bereft of any value whatever, they would not be able to reflect the “Most Great Light” and would be — as evil is according to the Writings — a lack of something instead of being actually existent. We must not over-value matter, as materialists have done, but we must not under-value it either as was done by some of the ancient Gnostics. Similarly, de Chardin tells us that “the Universe is illumined from within”<sup>225</sup> by which he means that matter bears signs of the Divine within it. Indeed, he felt so strongly about the nobility of matter that he actually wrote a “Hymn to Matter” as part of an essay entitled “The Spiritual Power of Matter” in which he praises, among other things, matter’s ability to “reveal to us the dimensions of God.”<sup>226</sup> From a Bahá'í point of view, there is nothing unseemly in this statement as long as we do not take it in a literal and/or material sense and read it as a revelation of God Himself, instead of His signs.

As we have seen earlier in this paper, Whitehead, and the Bahá'í Writings in one interpretation of various metaphors, believe that there is an inner or subjective side to all atoms which allows them to feel or experience the influences to which they are exposed. De Chardin would concur completely. He maintains that there is a “double-aspect”<sup>227</sup> to matter, that matter possesses a “within”<sup>228</sup> which is where we find for each atom, an



appropriate amount of freedom for development. Here again, we cannot help thinking again of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "every atom is possessed of a capacity to express all the virtues of the universe."<sup>229</sup> This statement suggests — and Whitehead and de Chardin would agree — that merely external, physical and mathematical descriptions cannot do full justice to the being of an atom: "within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light."<sup>230</sup> This "within" is, of course, the 'repository' of the potentials that each atom possesses as well as its own existentially unique standpoint — neither of which cannot be measured scientifically from the outside.

### Direction in Evolution

According to de Chardin, the cosmic process is not merely random and directionless change but rather displays a clearly identifiable pattern, namely, "the complexification of matter."<sup>231</sup> In *The Phenomenon of Man*, he writes "Historically, the stuff of the universe goes on becoming more concentrated into ever more organised forms of matter."<sup>232</sup> De Chardin also refers to this as the "radial energy"<sup>233</sup> of the universe "which draws [the cosmos] towards even greater complexity and centricity — in other words forwards."<sup>234</sup> Both Whitehead and the Bahá'í Writings would agree, Whitehead because the drive of universal creativity and novelty makes the development of complexity

inevitable and the Bahá'í Writings because they envisage a universe hierarchically organised into levels of increasing capacity from the matter, through the vegetable, and animal to the human.<sup>235</sup> As with de Chardin, these levels of capacity are expressed in differing, increasingly complex, combinations of matter. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes,

*Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.*<sup>236</sup>

In de Chardin's view, "[s]piritual perfection (or conscious 'centricity') and material synthesis (or complexity) are but the two aspects or connected parts of one and the same phenomenon."<sup>237</sup> The Writings agree with this view: "If the elements were not assembled together in affinity to produce the body of man, the higher intelligent forces could not be manifest in the body."<sup>238</sup> In other words, the human spirit, the rational soul, cannot appear in bodies less complex than the one we currently possess. For his part, de Chardin advocates what he calls the "Law of complexity and consciousness"<sup>239</sup> according to which different levels of material complexity allow the appearance of differing "aspects of spirit"<sup>240</sup> such as the vegetable, animal and, ultimately in nature, the human.

For both the Writings and de Chardin, humankind stands at the head of the cosmic developmental hierarchy. According to Bahá'u'lláh, "in him [man] are potentially revealed all the attributes and

names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed”<sup>241</sup> while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “This world is also in the condition of a fruit tree, and man is like the fruit; without fruit the tree would be useless.”<sup>242</sup> For de Chardin, humankind is the ‘spearhead’ of cosmic development, whose task is to “complete cosmic evolution.”<sup>243</sup> Humankind “flourishes on the leading shoot of zoological evolution.”<sup>244</sup>

From the foregoing discussion several ideas follow logically. First, the cosmic process is teleological in nature because it has an inner hierarchical structure and a goal towards which it strives. This means that cosmic evolution is progressive; it exhibits a qualitative, not just a quantitative advance, something that the Writings affirm in Their teachings about the increasing capacities of various kingdoms and the evolution of humankind. Second, insofar as they are involved in a goal-directed process, all entities, from atoms to human beings are, in a significant sense, incomplete. There are always more, and new, potentials to express which means that all things in some way experience a tension between what they are and what they could be, between their actual and possible selves. This tension is inherent in being part of a universe in constant process. It is the root of the self-dissatisfaction and ‘yearning for more’ that is felt by the majority of human beings. Third, the fact that all things are in process also means that in a certain way all entities, but especially human beings, are inherently “unstable”;<sup>245</sup> this increased instability is, of

course, a consequence of the increased freedom of capacity which we observe as we rise in the evolutionary hierarchy. We humans have more freedom than other beings but the resulting instability makes freedom existentially problematical for us: “man is given to himself as a problem of *freedom*.”<sup>246</sup> As the Bahá'í Writings show, freedom is a problem for us because it is often difficult to solve moral quandaries correctly. Such is the case because it is frequently difficult to balance a freedom or a “true liberty”<sup>247</sup> that is appropriate to our human nature with ‘licence,’ that is, the freedom due to an animal. It hardly needs saying that if freedom were not somewhat problematical for us, there would be no need for a Manifestation to guide our individual action and collective development.

### The Expansion of Consciousness

Both the Bahá'í Writings and de Chardin characterise the cosmic process as an expansion of consciousness as we rise from lower to higher forms of being. In the Writings, we see this expansion of consciousness as we ascend from the mineral, through the vegetable and animal to the human kingdom. At each level, new powers are added, such as augmentation, sensation, locomotion and abstract thought.<sup>248</sup> The higher an entity stands in this hierarchy, the more important will be its powers of sensation and thought; at the human level these powers reach their acme in the rational mind or soul which is able to transcend its material conditions.<sup>249</sup> De Chardin calls this

expansion of consciousness “cerebralization,”<sup>250</sup> which means that at the physical level, more and more nerve ganglions concentrate and begin to inter-act; as a result of this, spontaneity increases,<sup>251</sup> “instincts become more complex,”<sup>252</sup> “socialisation”<sup>253</sup> becomes increasingly important and consciousness increases. “Life is the rise of consciousness”<sup>254</sup> says de Chardin in a statement that sums up his views quite succinctly. Elsewhere he calls this process “psychogenesis.”<sup>255</sup>

The teleological nature of the world-process means that it is focussed or unified not from any efficient causes from below but rather from the final cause above. As de Chardin says, “The world does not hold together from below but from above.”<sup>256</sup> In the Bahá’í Writings, the idea that God unifies the world by being the “object of desire”<sup>257</sup> is, as we have already seen in our discussion of Whitehead, evident in three ways: the unmoved Mover moves others by attraction; the quest for self-actualisation is ultimately a quest for the final cause which is God; all things are identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. For his part, de Chardin turns the concept of unification “from above”<sup>258</sup> into the distinctive idea for which he is best known, namely, the “Omega-Point.”<sup>259</sup>

### The Omega-Point

According to de Chardin, evolution and human evolution in particular is focused on a final mystical goal, the “Omega-Point” which is his interpreta-

tion of the resurrection of the world and the final triumph of the spirit or mind.<sup>260</sup> The process by which this is to happen involves de Chardin’s belief that in humankind, evolution has become conscious of itself. He writes that “the consciousness of each one of us is evolution looking at itself and reflecting upon itself . . . Step by step, from the ‘juvenile earth’ onwards, we have followed *going upwards* the successive advances of consciousness in matter undergoing organisation.”<sup>261</sup> The evolution of human consciousness is part of the natural history of the world insofar as through us, matter is raised or sublimated to the level of consciousness and spirit. In humankind, “the eternal groping of life burst out in conscious reflection.”<sup>262</sup> This sublimation of matter into consciousness occurs not just in the individual but in humankind as a whole, in its social development and culture, both of which have cosmic, not merely local, significance.

Man is not the centre of the universe as once we thought in our simplicity, but something much more wonderful — the arrow pointing the way to the final unification of the world in terms of life.<sup>263</sup>

Humankind is “the head (terrestrial) of a Universe that is in the process of psychic transformation.”<sup>264</sup> “Mankind represents the culmination of the whole movement of matter and life”<sup>265</sup> because through us planetary evolution has transcended the lithosphere and the biosphere and has developed a “noosphere,”<sup>266</sup> that is, a distinct layer of cos-

mic development in which conscious thought and spirituality are the primary scene of evolutionary advance. This development was a potential that lay waiting in all matter throughout the universe. Thus, the arrival of humankind represents the highest stage of cosmic evolution: "man emerged from a general groping of the world. He was born a direct lineal descendent from a total effort of life..."<sup>267</sup> As more and more of the universe is 'cerebralised' in humankind, psychological and spiritual factors begin to play an ever larger role in the actualisation of the cosmos itself. Our social, economic, political, intellectual, artistic and spiritual history are "*still* natural history."<sup>268</sup> As de Chardin puts it, what we observe is a progressive "psychic interiorisation"<sup>269</sup> in which the world will be 're-born' or sublimated at a higher level.<sup>270</sup> Ultimately, this process will culminate in a perfect spiritual unity that he identifies with the God as incarnated in Christ:

Nevertheless, however efficacious this newly born faith of Man in the ultra-human may prove to be, it seems that Man's urge to *Some Thing* ahead of him cannot achieve its full fruition except by combining with another, and still more fundamental aspiration — one from above, urging him towards *Some One*.<sup>271</sup>

Elsewhere he writes:

Unless it is to be powerless to form the keystone of the noosphere, 'Omega' . . . can only be conceived as a *meeting-point* between a universe that has

reached the limit of centration, and another, even deeper, centre — this being the self-subsistent centre and absolutely final principle of irreversibility and personalisation: the one and only true Omega.<sup>272</sup>

In other words, when humankind, which is involved in a dialectic relationship with matter and life, reaches its last stage of psycho-spiritual development, the noosphere — and through it, the sublimated cosmos — will reach a stage of mystical union with the ultimate person, God in his incarnation as Christ.

It is important to recognise a significant difference between de Chardin's and the Writings' vision of the cosmic process. Although de Chardin's vision is not entirely clear and not without troublesome questions, this much is certain: he envisages a final 'apocalypse' in which humankind's spiritual development will reach a maximum of concentration in the "Omega-Point" and sublimates itself into a new form of being and spirit that in some way will become 'one' with God.

At that moment, St. Paul tells us (1 Cor. 15.23 ff) when Christ has emptied all created forces (rejecting in them everything that is a factor of dissociation and superanimating all that is a force for unity), he will consummate universal unification by giving himself, in his complete and adult body, with a final satisfied capacity for union, to the embrace of the Godhead.

Thus will be constituted the organic complex of God and the world . . . the Pleroma.<sup>273</sup>

Attaining this condition will require humankind not only “to abandon its organo-planetary foothold”<sup>274</sup> but also to detach itself from matter, that is, from “its material matrix.”<sup>275</sup> Humankind will evolve purely ‘noogenically,’ “upstream against the flow of entropy”<sup>276</sup> until it achieves some kind of ultimate ‘mystical’ union with God in which both are distinct and separate yet somehow one. What happens beyond this point, de Chardin does not say, but his words, imagery and tone strongly suggest that human history or evolution will come to an end.

Nothing in the Bahá’í Writings suggests such an ‘end to history’ either collectively or individually. According to Them, the human soul continues to evolve after death, gradually actualising its infinite potentials and becoming more pure just as carbon may become diamond without changing its essential composition.<sup>277</sup> In other words, our evolution never stops, and there is no final individual or collective state of any sort. For Bahá’ís, the apocalypse is not the end of the world in any ultimate sense, but simply a transition point from the world-order established by one Manifestation to the world-order established by Another. At that moment, when the “carpet of belief has been rolled up, the tokens of certitude blotted out;[and] the whole world has fallen into error,”<sup>278</sup> the world will be “revolutionized,”<sup>279</sup> ‘made new’ and be infused with new energies to continue its endless evolution. The concept of an end to evolution, even of material evolution, is simply foreign to

the Bahá’í Writings. Moreover, the concept of the Pleroma as described by de Chardin and Christian theology would require some major re-interpretation to become compatible with Bahá’í Writings which categorically reject any notion of creation actually becoming one with the Creator. Finally, it should be pointed out that insofar as they see no end to individual and collective human evolution, the Bahá’í Writings are more consistent in their commitment to process philosophy than de Chardin.

As this brief outline shows, there is no doubt that de Chardin’s views are a species of process philosophy, providing a magnificent vision of cosmic and human development that begins with mainstream empirical science and ends in sheer poetry and mysticism.<sup>280</sup> We are, however, left with several questions. To what extent does de Chardin’s process view overlap with the Bahá’í teachings? Or, to put it another way, to what extent do Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá anticipate de Chardin? To what extent are They and de Chardin merely compatible fellow-travellers in the same direction albeit, sometimes at least, on a different road?

First of all, the Writings and de Chardin agree that the history of the planet, including human history, represents a progress from the simple and unconscious to the complex, conscious and spiritual. Viewed as a whole, evolution displays a distinct hierarchy of forms and capacities. This becomes especially evident in humankind in whom evolution, now raised from the physical

to the cultural and spiritual realm, has diversified and accelerated. This rapid progress in humankind explains the need for Progressive Revelation, that is, a periodic renewal and expansion of our spiritual beliefs and practices as our capacities for understanding and action grow. Although de Chardin explicitly rejects the idea of a new revelation, he explicitly recognises the need for a religious renewal to meet our spiritual needs in this new situation. He recognises the necessity of “a new type of faith”<sup>281</sup> which he, as a Jesuit, did not identify with a “new temple”<sup>282</sup> but with the “laying of new foundations to which the old Church is gradually being moved.”<sup>283</sup> Curiously enough, he does admit that humankind’s new evolutionary situation seems “at least by implication, to be heralding the appearance of a religion destined to supplant all earlier creeds.”<sup>284</sup> Obviously, he senses the need for a new kind of spirituality. The Bahá'í attitude towards human progress is summoned up succinctly in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.”<sup>285</sup>

### A New Stage in Human Evolution

The Writings and de Chardin agree that the modern world represents a new and decisive development in evolution. 'Abdu'l-Bahá assures us that “Now the new age is here and creation is reborn. Humanity hath taken on new life.”<sup>286</sup> Bahá'u'lláh writes, “the world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating

influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System – the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.”<sup>287</sup> Similarly, de Chardin says, “There is now incontrovertible evidence that mankind has just entered the greatest period of change the world has ever known.”<sup>288</sup> In short, the Writings and de Chardin agree that a critical, but positive threshold has been crossed in human development. This is especially true from the Bahá'í point of view since Bahá'u'lláh represents not just the culmination of the Adamic cycle of human history but also the beginning of a new cycle of development.

The Writings and de Chardin also agree on the nature of this critical threshold, namely, what de Chardin calls the “planetisation”<sup>289</sup> of humankind. Having reached into all corners of the globe,<sup>290</sup> humans are now the decisively dominant life-form on the planet, and face the challenge of taking the next step in their evolution which must begin with explicit and conscious recognition of the ‘planetary situation’ of humankind. Bahá'u'lláh makes this clear in a single succinct statement: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens”<sup>291</sup> to which He adds, “It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world.”<sup>292</sup>

According to de Chardin, one result of this “planetisation” is that humankind is now going through “a phase of compression”<sup>293</sup> in which there are not only more people but in which diverse cultures, reli-

gions and systems of governance encounter each other directly and, despite their profound differences, have to find a *modus vivendi* to share the same 'living space'. De Chardin calls this the "twofold influences of planetary compression and psychic interpenetration"<sup>294</sup> which creates new tensions or energies<sup>295</sup> that must be used creatively. The Bahá'í Writings suggest a similar idea by exhorting us to overcome racial, national and religious prejudices in building of a new world order in which all peoples will have a rightful place.<sup>296</sup> According to de Chardin, an inevitable result of this compression of humankind is the need for human unification in some new whole: "the planetary forces (geographic, demographic, economic and psychic) [will] sooner or later compel us willy-nilly to unite in some form of human whole organised on the basis of human solidarity."<sup>297</sup> He speaks of "this inevitable unification of the human species."<sup>298</sup> Because of this global compression "[n]o one can deny that a network (a world network) of economic and psychic affiliations is being woven at ever increasing speed which envelops and constantly penetrates more deeply within each one of us."<sup>299</sup> There is no need to elaborate this point from a Bahá'í perspective because this insight about the necessity of unifying human kind is the very reason of the Bahá'í Faith's existence.

What is happening, in other words, is that humankind is being re-socialised in a new way to adapt to life in a radically new environment. This requires the for-

mation of new institutions and new forms of governance to meet the needs of the emerging global community. The old forms of organisation are no longer adequate, for which reason "Mankind seems to be approaching its critical point of social organisation . . . Our species, let us accept it, is entering its phase of socialisation; we cannot continue to exist without undergoing the transformation which in one way or another will forge our multiplicity into a whole."<sup>300</sup> In other words, de Chardin foresees the rise of what the Bahá'í Writings call "collective centers"<sup>301</sup> adequate to the needs of the new age. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the national, religious and cultural "collective centers" of the past must be replaced.

*With the appearance of great revolutions and upheavals, all these collective centres are swept away. But the Collective Center of the Kingdom, embodying the Institutes and Divine Teachings, is the eternal Collective Center. It establishes relationship between the East and the West, organizes the oneness of the world of humanity, and destroys the foundation of differences. It overcomes and includes all the other collective centers.*<sup>302</sup>

From a Bahá'í perspective, these new "collective centers" are the various institutions from the local spiritual assembly at the grassroots level, to the national spiritual assembly and finally the Universal House of Justice at the global level. We also find other branches such as the Counsellors, the Institution of the

Learned and Auxiliary Board Members each with their own rights and responsibilities. From a Bahá'í perspective, these are the centers around which the future governance of the world will be organised.

### Spiritual Unification

One of the consequences of the “compression” of humankind is that people will become more inwardly or spiritually unified with each other. Evolution leads to unification not just outwardly but inwardly as well. According to de Chardin, we are “no longer [in a phase] of physical expansion and exteriorisation but of psychic interiorisation – and it is in that direction that the terrestrial noosphere in process of concentration (through complexification) seems to be destined.”<sup>303</sup> We are developing, as he puts it elsewhere, a global “atmosphere of active sympathy.”<sup>304</sup> Because this leads to an “intensification of reflective life”<sup>305</sup>

... the elements of Mankind [will] succeed in making effective a profound force of mutual attraction, deeper and more powerful than the surface-repulsion which causes them to diverge. Forced upon one another by the dimensions and mechanics of the earth, men will purposefully bring to life *a common soul in this vast body*.<sup>306</sup>

Reading this, no Bahá'í could fail to remember Bahá'u'lláh's statement that “He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race *as one*

*soul and one body*.”<sup>307</sup> Nor should we forget His exhortation,

Since 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.<sup>308</sup>

Both de Chardin and the Bahá'í Faith also agree that the evolution of humankind is not just an individual affair but something which has a social aspect, especially now in the global age. De Chardin writes that “no elemental thread in the Universe is wholly independent in its growth of its neighbouring threads.”<sup>309</sup> In the next stage of the evolutionary process, “the social element subtly enters to take the place of the ‘anatomical’”;<sup>310</sup> resorting to metaphor, he states “[t]o reach the sun, nothing less is required than the combined growth of the entire foliage.”<sup>311</sup> In short, no one in this new age can make progress in isolation from his fellow human beings, because it is now more true than ever that “no man is an island entire of itself.”<sup>312</sup> Once again, this idea is something that Bahá'ís readily recognise. The reason for the Faith's enormous stress on taking an active part in community life no matter how challenging that might be, is the recognition that no human being can develop fully and completely in isolation and retreat from others and the world. That is why Bahá'u'lláh enjoined monks to leave their cloisters and to



actively contribute to the world:<sup>313</sup> without facing the challenges of life with others, inner growth cannot help but be impoverished, stunted and, therefore, of limited value in a unified world.

## The New Individual

This is not to say that the Writings and de Chardin are somehow 'against' the notion of individualism. Rather, they would both have us transform our concept of what it means to be an individual away from the isolated atomic individualism that has dominated modern civilization during the last three centuries. De Chardin writes,

If there is any characteristic clearly observable in the progress of Nature towards higher consciousness, it is that this is achieved by *increasing differentiation*, which in itself causes ever *stronger individualities* to emerge.<sup>314</sup>

He then enunciates what is surely one of his most original insights, namely, that "true union"<sup>315</sup> increases diversity. De Chardin arrives at this concept by distinguishing between "an aggregate, a 'heap'"<sup>316</sup> as exemplified by modern forms of collectivism as seen in communism and fascism, and "true union" which

does nothing to eliminate differences. On the contrary, it *exalts them* . . . In every practical sphere true union (that is to say, synthesis) does not confound; it *differentiates* . . . Evidence of the fact that union differentiates is to be seen all around us — in the bodies

of all the higher forms of life, in which the cells become almost infinitely complicated according to the variety of tasks they have to perform . . .<sup>317</sup>

This is because "[i]n every organised whole, the parts perfect themselves and fulfil themselves."<sup>318</sup> This augmentation of individuality is especially pronounced in conscious beings because the range of relationships in which they are involved, and, consequently, the range of possible individual development, are enormously expanded and enriched. At de Chardin's Omega-Point, this degree of individualisation would reach the "Hyper-Personal."<sup>319</sup> At that point, the range of our sympathies will become universal. Though they express themselves in more restrained language, the Bahá'í Writings share de Chardin's belief that union does not threaten individuality, and, in fact, enhances it. That is why they urge us to become as "one soul"<sup>320</sup> and admonish us to "consider every one on the earth as a friend; regard the stranger as an intimate, and the alien as a companion."<sup>321</sup> It is obvious, of course, that becoming "one soul" is the Writings' way of referring to de Chardin's concept of being "ultra-personalise[d]"<sup>322</sup> through a richer network of relationships or, "psychic interpenetration"<sup>323</sup> The Bahá'í Faith's commitment to the preservation not extinction of individuality is also evident in its commitment to "unity in diversity"<sup>324</sup> and is further emphasised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's metaphor of the best garden being that which includes the greatest diversity of plants and flowers.<sup>325</sup> It is clear that

both de Chardin and the Writings see the individual, not as a 'social atom' in magnificent isolation but rather as part of a potentially cosmic net of relations each of which represents a new avenue of personal enrichment.

In *The Phenomenon of Man*, de Chardin warns us not "to confuse individuality with personality."<sup>326</sup> The difference between the two is that individuality is the result of separation and atomising from others; it results from creating barriers between elements and thus prevents them from joining into a greater, all-inclusive whole. A universal struggle for existence is the inevitable result of individualising. Personality, on the other hand, can only be found by "uniting together"<sup>327</sup> in a way that does not vitiate differences but rather integrates them in a whole that exhibits "unity in diversity."<sup>328</sup> The challenge for humankind is to evolve a social structure that can actually achieve this goal which de Chardin believes must be reached if we are to evolve as a species. For their part, the Bahá'í Writings do not make a formal distinction between the individual and the person, but the same idea is, nonetheless, implicit in them. They frequently remind us that it is necessary to overcome our selfish desires or ego in order to reach a higher state of being or "higher self"<sup>329</sup> which de Chardin would identify as the 'person'. Shoghi Effendi, for example, writes,

The only people who are truly free of the "dross of self" are the Prophets, for to be free of one's ego is a hall-mark of perfection...

The ego is the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires. By obeying the laws of God, seeking to live the life laid down in our teachings, and prayer and struggle, we can subdue our egos. We call people "saints" who have achieved the highest degree of mastery over their egos.<sup>330</sup>

Although he does not say so explicitly, Shoghi Effendi is implicitly describing a state of being that has transcended the 'animal' struggles involved in 'individuality' and has attained a fuller and richer mode of being in 'personality' in de Chardin's sense. In this sense too, we see a sign of a Nietzschean element in the Bahá'í Writings as well as in de Chardin insofar as both urge humankind to embark consciously and wilfully on the evolution of a 'super-man' or higher form of humanity. Both see humanity in its current form not as a final and finished product but as a transitional stage to something higher and more noble.<sup>331</sup>

## Freedom

Because they believe in "unity in diversity," the Writings and de Chardin are committed to freedom which they both see as rooted in the consciousness of humankind. The roots of freedom lie in the fact that we are able, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, to "be emancipated and free from the captivity of the world of nature"<sup>332</sup> which allows us to access the "Ideal Power"<sup>333</sup> which will free us from the "ferocious"<sup>334</sup> struggle for existence through rational co-operation. There is

an interesting idea implicit in this line of thought. It suggests what we might call 'evolutionary freedom.' Locked in the struggle for existence, humans are able to actualise only a very limited portion of their capacities and are, thereby, confined in their freedom of growth and thus, in a significant sense, not free. In other words, freedom must not just be seen as political freedom but also as the opportunity to actualise one's potentials. Lack of opportunities to actualise one's potentials is, therefore, a significant loss of freedom, one that is often overlooked in discussions of this subject and in reflections on how much freedom a society or culture actually possess.

De Chardin has a similar idea, though he approaches it differently, asserting that humankind represents a "‘Lamarkian’ or human zone"<sup>335</sup> — as opposed to a 'Darwinian zone' — in which conscious and rational goals predominate over unconsciousness, chance and blind instinctual drive. As the cosmic process unfolds, the "Lamarkian zone" of freedom grows dramatically with the arrival of consciousness, with expanded opportunities for conscious self-actualisation and with increased power of rational choice. De Chardin, too, is implicitly sceptical of any one-sided bias that freedom only refers to 'political' or 'social' freedom — which is often tinged with ideas of competition and struggle — and fails to recognise the enormous importance of the freedom or opportunity to self-actualise.

However, this new, expanded vision of freedom must not be interpreted to mean

that the Writings do not support the notion of freedom in the sense of a right to independent thought and self-expression. In fact, the opposite is true: the Bahá'í Writings unequivocally support a high degree of personal freedom as a necessary condition for continued evolutionary process:

*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.*<sup>336</sup>

For his part, de Chardin tells us that "[e]volution . . . charges itself with an ever-increasing measure of freedom."<sup>337</sup> Without freedom, it would be impossible to establish what he calls "a harmonised collectivity"<sup>338</sup> since a lack of freedom would undermine the essential attribute of harmony. Bahá'ís can only wholeheartedly agree with de Chardin's statement that "God has made good will the basis upon which our super-natural growth is founded. The pure heart, the right intentions, are the organs of the higher life . . ."<sup>339</sup> This declaration cannot help but remind us of Bahá'u'lláh's admonition in *The Hidden Words*: "My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting."<sup>340</sup> In other words, both the Writings and de Chardin see personal freedom and evolution, or the cosmic process, as advancing together in tandem.

This is not to say, however, that freedom, as the Writings and de Chardin see

it, is license, a mere ego-driven 'power trip' through our natural and/or social environment. With capacity for choice arises the power of *rational* freedom which is not in conflict with being a part of a genuine community, that is, a "community of desire"<sup>341</sup> based on "free consent."<sup>342</sup> Both de Chardin and the Writings recognise that "unification through coercion leads only to a superficial pseudo-unity"<sup>343</sup> which by its very nature is incompatible with genuine, that is, rational freedom in which the freedom of one individual is harmonised with the freedom of all. For example, as Shoghi Effendi writes,

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>344</sup>

De Chardin makes the same point by saying, "If there is a future for mankind, it can only be imagined in terms of a harmonious conciliation of what is free with what is planned and totalised."<sup>345</sup> In other words, freedom is not an absolute either for the individual part or the whole community but a matter of dialectical balance among the various goods involved in a situation. This freedom is enriched, not impoverished by relationship, because each relationship represents an opportunity to develop one's potentials and possibly to actualise new ones. Our active participation in a community of consent is an unavoidable part

of our evolutionary development.

## The Manifestations

Unlike the Bahá'í Writings, de Chardin's cosmic vision has room for only one historical Manifestation of God. As a Jesuit priest, he was committed to the belief that Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God is not only our evolutionary guide as we are drawn by "God's magnetism"<sup>346</sup> but is also the "Omega-Point" of our final destination. His works contain no explicit recognition of other Manifestations such as the Buddha, Muḥammad or Bahá'u'lláh and, given his life-long dedication to the Church, it is doubtful that he would consciously have admitted them to be more than extra-ordinarily wise men and allies in the project of human evolution. However, the Catholic Church was uneasy about de Chardin's theology<sup>347</sup> and the reason is not hard to understand: de Chardin's vision of Jesus Christ is highly abstract and far-removed from the Jesus of Nazareth Who was born in a stable, crucified and, according to Church teachings, physically resurrected. Rather, de Chardin's Christ is more like a cosmic force than a 'personal saviour'; he talks about 'the Universal Christ,' about 'Christ the Evolver,' about 'the Christic.'<sup>348</sup> In contrast to the Thomistic world-view that is the official philosophy of the Church, de Chardin adopted a "Scotist interpretation"<sup>349</sup> according to which "Christ is held to be the goal and crowning point not only of the supernatural but of the natural order."<sup>350</sup> In

the case of the Church, there is now an uneasy alliance between the two. This leaves us with the question of the extent to which his vision of Christ is compatible with Bahá'í teachings.

The Bahá'í teaching about the two stations of the Manifestation eases acceptance of de Chardin's views about Christ because it allows us to distinguish between the Manifestation in "the station of pure abstraction"<sup>351</sup> in which They are all one are function very much like the life-giving Christ in de Chardin:

*Nay, all else besides these Manifestation, live by the operation of their Will, and have their being through the outpourings of their grace.*<sup>352</sup>

Regarding the Manifestations, Bahá'u'lláh also writes:

*The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Through them the clouds rain their bounty upon men, and the earth bringeth forth its fruits. All things must needs have a cause, a motive power, an animating principle. These souls and symbols of detachment have provided, and will continue to provide, the supreme moving impulse in the world of being.*<sup>353</sup>

Thus, we may conclude that if we regard the Manifestation in His "station of pure abstraction"<sup>354</sup> and in His cosmic function, de Chardin's vision of the

'cosmic Christ' Who draws all beings upward and Who also manifests his power within them is not unlike the Bahá'í vision of the Manifestation articulated in the previous two quotations. In both cases, the Manifestation functions like a 'world-soul' that suffuses all being with its power.

When we regard the Manifestation in His "station of distinction,"<sup>355</sup> in other words, when we regard Christ in His historical appearance as Jesus of Nazareth, there are no significant differences between the Writings and de Chardin's view. Bahá'ís accept Jesus Christ as presented in the Bible. Of course, de Chardin would reject the notion that Bahá'u'lláh is a Manifestation of God and this is obviously a significant difference between de Chardin and Bahá'í teachings. However, this difference does not compromise some essential similarities in "the station of pure abstraction."

## Conclusions

As a result of this initial exploration of the Bahá'í Writings and modern process philosophy, we are in a position to draw four major conclusions. First and most important, is that the Bahá'í Writings may be interpreted as a species of process philosophy offering a dynamic interpretation of the universe. Indeed, our exploration of Their relationship to the work of Whitehead and de Chardin strongly suggests that once explored from this point of view, the Writings will make Their own unique contribution to the development of process philoso-

phy in new directions.

Second, we may conclude that by studying other process philosophies such as Whitehead's and de Chardin's, we will discover new ways to enrich our understanding of the Writings Themselves. For Bahá'ís this is valuable as a deepening of their knowledge of their religious faith; for non-Bahá'ís, this is valuable as shedding new light on a relatively unexplored aspect of humanity's intellectual history.

Third, this initial exploration shows that the Bahá'í Writings possess an extraordinary range of affinities to philosophies that seem, at first glance, to be utterly dissimilar in content and general outlook.<sup>356</sup> This suggests that the Writings are extremely rich in their implicit as well as explicit content and merit further in-depth philosophical exploration to bring more of this richness to light. On the basis of this paper, one of the most obvious areas of such exploration would be to follow Whitehead's discussion of Buddhist metaphysics with an exploration of how a process interpretation of the Writings relates the Bahá'í Faith to Buddhism in regards to metaphysical doctrines such as 'dependent arising' and their ethical implications. From a Bahá'í viewpoint this would be especially significant because of the teaching of the essential agreement of all religions.

Fourth, the close affinities and compatibilities with the work of Whitehead are significant because they establish a bridge between the Writings and one of

the most important developments in scientific history, a quantum understanding of cosmic processes. This has incalculable ramifications for a based understanding of physical processes as well as issues related to psychology and spirituality such as the mind-body problem and the question of immortality and the proofs of God. It also helps the Bahá'í Faith to meet its commitment to overcome the conflicts between science and religion.

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## Notes

1. Gr. "Everything flows." Attributed to Heraclitus.
2. The importance of harmonising religion and science is clear early in *Process and Reality*, where Whitehead writes that the highest task of philosophy is "fusing the two, namely religion and science, into one rational scheme of thought." *Process and Reality* 19.
3. *Process and Reality* 27.
4. "Creativity is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact." *Process and Reality* 25.  
There is some debate among process philosophers as to whether or not 'creativity' is, in effect, the ultimate source of all entities, and, therefore, the Godhead Who manifests God.
5. Thus, process philosophy is not handicapped by all the difficulties associated with the 'mind-body' problem, nor does it — at least in Whitehead's version — find the existence of the 'soul' scientifically troubling. In Whitehead's view, a human body is a "society" of actual occasions co-ordinated by a "dominant occasion" called a soul.
6. Peter Russell is perhaps the most famous among them.
7. *Process and Reality* 193. The Ninth Category of Explanation states, "That how an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is . . . Its 'being' is constituted by its 'becoming'." (*Process and Reality*, 28)
8. *Process and Reality* 26.
9. Ibid. 23.
10. *Some Answered Questions* 203.
11. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 377.
12. Ibid.
13. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 52.
14. *Some Answered Questions* 281.
15. *Process and Reality* 23.
16. Ibid. vi.
17. Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings."
18. The importance of this teaching is seen in the application to which it is put in the immediately following section: it is the basis of the Master's proof of the spirit's continued development after death.
19. *Some Answered Questions* 233. See also *Foundations of World Unity*, 83, 57; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 160, 284, 285.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. *Process and Reality* 27.
24. *Bahá'í World Faith* 337.
25. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 140. See also *Bahá'í World Faith*, 224.
26. Ibid. 284.
27. *Bahá'í World Faith* 351.
28. *Foundations of World Unity* 12.
29. Ibid. 85.
30. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141, italics added.
31. Ibid.
32. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 52
33. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141.
34. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 272, 272.
35. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*.
36. As in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, 32. See also *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 34; *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 12, 14; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 277; *Bahá'í World Faith* 350.
37. For example, in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 88, 160, 284, 285, 350; *Foundations of World Unity* 52.
38. *Some Answered Questions* 182.
39. *Some Answered Questions* 191-194. See also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 357-359.
40. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 215.
41. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 37.
42. *The Phenomenon of Man* 201-204.
43. Ibid.
44. *Man's Place in Nature* 116.
45. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 37, 59, 125.
46. *Process and Reality* 22.
47. Ibid. 39-40.



48. Ibid. 26.
49. Ibid. 39.
50. *Some Answered Questions* 233.
51. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 52
52. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141. The same idea is also suggested in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 160.
53. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXVI, 61.
54. *Process and Reality* 34.
55. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141.
56. Whitehead requires some interpretation on this issue. Does an actual occasion only exist once? Since each actual occasion inherits its data from a particular predecessor and bequeaths its data to a particular successor, the answer to this question depends on whether we focus on the one occasion or on its 'whole line'. If we focus on the latter, as I think we should, it is evident that an actual occasion and its predecessors and successors are phases of a single life-history. The actual occasion perishes, but only in a sense.
57. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141.
58. *Adventures in Ideas* 206.
59. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 144
60. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141.
61. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 378.
62. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 168; italics added.
63. *Prayers and Meditations* 90.
64. *Prayers and Meditations* 15.
65. Ibid.
66. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 260.
67. Ibid.
68. Each present occasion contains its entire past and anticipates its future. "The past has an objective existence in the present which lies in the future beyond itself." *Adventures of Ideas* 193. Later in *Adventures of Ideas* 194, Whitehead writes that each actual occasion re-enacts its predecessors and anticipates its successors.
69. It must be realised that in a paper of this length, only the barest essentials necessary for the author to make his point can be included on this matter.
70. *Process and Reality* 128.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid. vi.
74. *Process and Reality* 22.
75. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 260.
76. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XCIV, 192.
77. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, 177.
78. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 58.
79. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 30.
80. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* V, 7.
81. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXVI, 62.
82. "These contrasted aspects will be called the physical and the mental poles of an actual entity." *Process and Reality* 280.
83. *Bahá'í World Faith*, 310 -311.
84. One might think of the Pauli Exclusion Principle here, which states that no two electrons, or other fermions, can exist in identical energy states. This too is a rudimentary form of individuality.
85. Whitehead denies that all experience is conscious. This denial is the basis of his criticism of Hume's theory of perception which assumes that all is not only sensory but conscious. Whitehead points to our memory of what we did a minute ago as an example of non-sensory perception.
86. "If the term 'eternal objects' is disliked, the term 'potentials' would be suitable. The eternal objects are the pure potentials of the universe . . ." *Process and Reality* 173.
87. *Bahá'í World Faith* 310- 311.
88. *Bahá'í World Faith* 310-311. The Manifestations, of course, reflect the divine perfections to a pre-eminent degree.
89. *Process and Reality* 30. See also 262, 285, 286.
90. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, 178.
91. "He is the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire. His particular relevance to each creative act . . . constitutes him the initial 'object of desire' establishing the

- initial phase of each subjective aim.”  
*Process and Reality* 406.
92. *Process and Reality* 131.
  93. *Some Answered Questions* 129.
  94. *Ibid.* 1.
  95. *Process and Reality* 260.
  96. *Process and Reality* 173.
  97. *Ibid.*
  98. See *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 17, 51, 53, 69, 74, 91, 97, 129, 302, 309, 352, 452; *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 65, 67, 68; *Bahá'í World Faith* 262, 267; *The Secret of Divine Civilization* 14 under the headings of ‘potential’ or ‘latent’.
  99. *Process and Reality* 173.
  100. *Ibid.*
  101. *Ibid.*, 174.
  102. Freedom of development in Whitehead
  103. Whitehead calls this sensitivity or susceptibility “experience” or “prehension” but this must not be taken to mean conscious experience such as enjoyed by animals and humankind. Experiencing and prehending in Whitehead is simply the ability to be affected or causally influenced by other actual entities. All higher forms of *conscious* experience are based on such susceptibility. Whitehead calls it the “blind perceptivity” of actual occasions. *Process and Reality* 338.
  104. *Process and Reality* 26.
  105. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 285-286; italics added.
  106. *Ibid.*
  107. *Ibid.*
  108. *Ibid.*
  109. *Science and the Modern World* 79. See also “In this theory [organicism], the molecules may blindly run...but the molecules differ in their intrinsic characters according to the general organic plans of the situation in which they find themselves.” *Science and the Modern World* 80.
  110. *Process and Reality* 121.
  111. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 285-286.
  112. *Process and Reality* 179.
  113. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 285-286.
  114. *Modes of Thought* 164.
  115. *Some Answered Questions* 178-179.
  116. *Process and Reality* 6. See also 10, 24.
  117. *Some Answered Questions* 178-179.
  118. “. . . the subjective forms of the conceptual prehensions constitute the drive of the Universe, whereby each occasion precipitates itself into the future.” *Adventures of Ideas* 196.
  119. Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*, 307.
  120. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072a,b.
  121. *Process and Reality* 406.
  122. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072a,b.
  123. *Process and Reality* 406.
  124. *Prayers and Meditations* LX, 115. See also LXX, 115; *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* C, 200; CLXIII, 341.
  125. *Foundations of World Unity* 73. See also *Prayers and Meditations* CLX, 252.
  126. *Some Answered Questions* 280.
  127. *Process and Reality* 174.
  128. *Ibid.* See also *Process and Reality* 105.
  129. *Some Answered Questions* 233-234.
  130. *Ibid.*
  131. *Ibid.*
  132. *Some Answered Questions* 280.
  133. *Ibid.*
  134. *Process and Reality* chapter V and *Science and the Modern World* provide in-depth and detailed analysis of the various analytical and logical flaws in Hume's arguments against causality.
  135. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LXXXVII, 162. See also *Some Answered Questions* 280,
  136. *Prayers and Meditations* 262. See also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 308 and *Science and the Modern World* 174.
  137. *Science and the Modern World* 174. See also *Process and Reality* 286, 406.
  138. *Some Answered Questions* 280.
  139. *Ibid.*
  140. *Science and the Modern World* 174.
  141. *Ibid.*
  142. *Ibid.*
  143. Tablet to Dr. Forel in *Bahá'í World Faith* 343.

144. *Some Answered Questions* 180. See also 204, 225, 281.
145. *Process and Reality* 285.
146. *Some Answered Questions* 280.
147. See *The Divine Relativity* by Charles Hartshorne.
148. *Process and Reality* 408
149. Ibid.
150. *Process and Reality* 405.
151. Ibid.
152. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 12.
153. Ibid 66.
154. That God is his knowledge ensures the unity of God; as Bahá'u'lláh says, "He, verily, is one and indivisible; one in His essence, one in His attributes." *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCIII, 187.
155. *Process and Reality* 405.
156. *Process and Reality* 405.
157. Ibid.
158. Ibid.
159. Ibid, 407.
160. Ibid.
161. Ibid.
162. Ibid.
163. Ibid.
164. *Process and Reality* 406.
165. Ibid.
166. Ibid. 407.
167. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXVI, 61.
168. *Process and Reality* 407.
169. Ibid. 407-408.
170. Ibid.
171. Ibid. 407.
172. Ibid. 413.
173. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XIX, 46.
174. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 39.
175. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 246.
176. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LII, 105.
177. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 182.
178. *Process and Reality* 58.
179. *Process and Reality* 405. "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification."
180. *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* 288.
181. Ibid.
182. Called "Eternal Objects" which are a revival of Plato's Ideas.
183. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 12.
184. *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* 295.
185. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXVII, 66.
186. Our understanding of the divine attributes is at best analogical because God obviously possesses all attributes in way that is utterly superior to all human understanding. In the language of traditional theology, He possesses these attributes in a 'pre-eminent' manner.
187. *Some Answered Questions* 220-221; italics added.
188. It might be objected that "these attributes, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation" (*Some Answered Questions* 149) and not to God. But this does not change the situation.  
  
In order to understand the Manifestations and follow God's instructions, there must be some kind of resemblance between our understanding of the attributes and the attributes themselves. Whether this resemblance is inherent by analogical similarity, or whether it is simply a result of divine fiat is, ultimately, of no consequence.
189. By a 'naturalistic' explanation, I mean, an explanation in terms of processes that are already evident elsewhere throughout nature.
190. "The initial stage of the aim is rooted in the nature of God." *Process and Reality* 285.
191. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXII, 54.
192. *Adventures of Ideas* 240.
193. Ibid. 243.
194. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 61-62; italics added.
195. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*

- 79; italics added.
196. *Some Answered Questions* 217–218.
197. Reenchantment without Supernaturalism, 332.
198. Ibid. 332.
199. *Process and Reality* chapters V and VI.
200. *Some Answered Questions* 239. See also, for example, 89, 90, 134, 146. The subject of substance in the Writings is discussed in greater detail in my “The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings.”
201. *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* 113.
202. Ibid. 116.
203. See “The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings.”
204. *Adventures of Ideas* 209.
205. *Process and Reality* 164.
206. *Adventures of Ideas* 209.
207. Ibid.
208. David Ray Griffin relates this to the notion that “each occasion of the soul's existence might not necessarily need to include prehension of a brain.” *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism* 239.
209. *Some Answered Questions* 233.
210. *The Future of Man* 11.
211. *The Phenomenon of Man* 53.
212. *Hymn of the Universe* 63.
213. Ibid. 64.
214. *The Prayer of the Universe* 63.
215. *Hymn of the Universe* 64.
216. Ibid. 84.
217. *The Phenomenon of Man* 62.
218. Ibid. 286, italics added.
219. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 285–286.
220. *Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.* *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, 177.
221. *Man's Place in Nature* 18.
222. Ibid. 19.
223. *Some Answered Questions* 182–183.
224. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, 177, italics added.
225. *The Future of Man* 95.
226. *Hymn of the Universe* 64.
227. *The Phenomenon of Man* 61.
228. Ibid. 59.
229. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 285–286.
230. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, 177.
231. *Man's Place in Nature* 19.
232. *The Phenomenon of Man* 54.
233. *The Phenomenon of Man* 70.
234. Ibid.
235. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 29.
236. *Bahá'í World Faith* 298. See also *Some Answered Questions* 143, 144, 179.
237. *The Phenomenon of Man* 66.
238. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 207. The whole talk deals with the subject of combinations of matter.
239. *The Phenomenon of Man* 67.
240. *Some Answered Questions* 143.
241. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 101.
242. *Some Answered Questions* 201. See also “For in [man] are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree no other created being hath excelled or surpassed.” *Bahá'í World Faith* 116.
243. *The Prayer of the Universe* 62.
244. *The Phenomenon of Man* 200. See also 210, 247.
245. *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* 101.
246. Ibid. 118.
247. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XLIII, 92. See also CLIX 335–336.
248. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 29.
249. *Bahá'í World Faith* 242. See also 317.
250. *The Phenomenon of Man* 159.
251. Ibid. 167.
252. Ibid. 160.

253. Ibid.
254. Ibid. 169.
255. Ibid. 201.
256. De Chardin quoted in *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* 80.
257. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072a.
258. De Chardin, quoted in *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* 80.
259. *The Phenomenon of Man* 286.
260. *The Phenomenon of Man* 316.
261. *The Phenomenon of Man* 244.
262. Ibid. 226.
263. Ibid. 247.
264. *The Future of Man* 70.
265. *Building the Earth* 50.
266. Ibid. 200. In *The Future of Man* 180, he calls it "a stupendous thinking machine."
267. Ibid. 210.
268. Ibid. 230.
269. *Man's Place in Nature* 116.
270. In *The Future of Man* 137 he also calls this "the super-organisation of Matter upon itself."
271. *The Future of Man* 302.
272. *Man's Place in Nature* 121.
273. *The Future of Man* 323. Significantly, this chapter is entitled "The End of the World."
274. *The Phenomenon of Man* 315.
275. Ibid. 316.
276. Ibid.
277. *Some Answered Questions* 223-224.
278. *The Secret of Divine Civilization* 56.
279. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LXX 136,
280. The similarities to Hegel to name another prominent process philosopher are difficult to miss.
281. *Building the Earth* 111.
282. *The Future of Man* 23.
283. Ibid.
284. Ibid. 22.
285. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CIX, 215.
286. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 252.
287. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LXX, 136.
288. *Building the Earth* 49.
289. *The Future of Man* 120. See also 130.
290. *The Future of Man* 182, de Chardin notes, "The greatest empires in history have never covered more than a fragment of the earth."
291. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CXVII, 250.
292. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XLIII, 95.
293. *The Future of Man* 238. See also *Man's Place in Nature* 113, "the compressive phase of civilization."
294. Ibid. 249.
295. Ibid. 183.
296. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 287- 288. See also *Foundations of World Unity* 35.
297. *The Future of Man* 206.
298. Ibid.
299. Ibid. 177.
300. Ibid. 42.
301. *Bahá'í World Faith* 419.
302. Ibid.
303. *Man's Place in Nature* 116.
304. *The Phenomenon of Man* 315.
305. *The Future of Man* 287.
306. *The Future of Man* 76.
307. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CVII, 214, italics added. See also CXXII, 260.
308. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic) #68.
309. *The Future of Man* 87.
310. *The Future of Man* 287.
311. *The Phenomenon of Man* 269.
312. John Donne *Meditation XVII*.
313. *Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, 95.
314. *The Future of Man* 53, italics added.
315. Ibid. 55.
316. Ibid.
317. Ibid., original italics. Obviously de Chardin means 'synthesis' in a Hegelian sense in which the thesis and the antithesis are combined in a new form that encompasses both at a higher, sublimated,

- level.
318. *The Phenomenon of Man* 288.
319. Ibid., 286. See also 190: "union does not restrict, but exalts the possibilities of our being." See also *The Future of Man* 266 where he says evolution will "ultra-personalise us."
320. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CVII, 214. See de Chardin's reference to "a common human soul" in *Building the Earth* 80.
321. *Bahá'í World Faith* 215. See also 296.
322. *The Future of Man* 266.
323. Ibid. 249.
324. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42.
325. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 291.
326. *The Phenomenon of Man* 289, original italicised.
327. Ibid.
328. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 41.
329. *Paris Talks* 179. See also *Dawn of a New Day* 218.
330. *Unfolding Destiny* 453.
331. In *The Prayer of the Universe* 68, de Chardin mentions that a "super-mankind is emerging" as the human spirit increasingly liberates itself its earlier, that is, more animalistic, evolutionary conditions.
332. *Foundations of World Unity* 30.
333. Ibid.
334. Ibid.
335. *The Future of Man* 213.
336. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 197.
337. *The Future of Man* 75.
338. *The Phenomenon of Man* 276.
339. *The Prayer of the Universe* 85.
340. *The Hidden Words* (Arabic) # 1.
341. *The Future of Man* 300.
342. Ibid.
343. Ibid., 77.
344. *Bahá'í Administration*, 87.
345. *The Phenomenon of Man* 310.
346. *Hymn of the Universe* 77.
347. See for example, *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin*.
348. *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin* 140.
349. Ibid. 131.
350. Ibid.
351. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXII, 51.
352. Ibid. XC, 179.
353. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LXXXI, 157, italics added.
354. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXII, 51.
355. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXII, 52.
356. For relationships to other philosophies in the past and present, see "Neoplatonism: Framework for a Bahá'í Metaphysics" by Nima Hazini; "Neoplatonism: Framework for a Bahá'í Ontology" by Mark Foster; "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" and "The Call into Being: Introduction to a Bahá'í Existentialism" by Ian Kluge.

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# Kaleidoscope

## Some Aspects of Angelology, Light, the Divine Throne and Color Mysticism in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture

*Stephen Lambden*

*Say: O my God! O my God! I supplicate Thee by the blood of Thy chosen Ones through whom the countenances of the Supreme Concourse (malá' al-a'lá) and the companions of the Crimson Ark (aḥṣáb al-ṣafínat al-ḥamrá') hath been dyed crimson, to make me one that crieth out in Thy Name and is steadfast in Thy Cause. Thou, verily art the Powerful, the Mighty, the All Gracious.*

*Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh*

*Praise be to God Who hath caused the Light to circle round the twin Mounts of His Light and made the Light to revolve around the twin Spheres of His Light. He hath caused the Light to beam forth in the Loci of His Light and made the Light to be retained in the Repositories of His Light. [Additionally] He hath caused the Light to scintillate through the impulses of His Light and made the Light to shine resplendent in the Countenances of His Light. Praise God! Praised be God! Worthy of praise is He Who establishes His Own worth, for besides Him there is none other.*

*Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ-i kull al-ta'ám*

A kaleidoscope (Gk. *kalos* = beautiful + *eidos* = form) is an optical 'toy', a device in which beautiful colors and forms can be visually experienced. This brief paper will exhibit kaleidoscopic features in being something of a *kashkúl* ("begging bowl") to mix my metaphors. It will contain miscellaneous notes relating to religious cosmology, angelology, color and "throne" symbolism in select Abrahamic, Bábí, Bahá'í, and religious and mystical texts. It will be seen that colours are related to the theology of the celestial Throne. It will be demonstrated here that angels, lights of different kinds and the Throne of God

are all motifs closely related to each other. First, a few paragraphs by way of setting the scene.

### Angelology

Though a complex theological subject, angelology can be given a quite simple (though necessarily inadequate) definition. It may be regarded as the study of the doctrine regarding angels (Ar. *malak*; Per. *firishtih*). It is the study and mystical significance of the myriad variety of angels, including so-called archangelic beings. Bahá'ís, it can be said at the outset, do not believe in the literal existence of angels as distinct, non-human, super-



natural orders of celestial beings. They interpret non-literally the ontological reality of such angels and archangels as they are traditionally pictured and understood. In line with its modernistic demythologization perspectives, Bahá'í sacred writings interpret "angels" as scriptural symbols capable of various "spiritual" significances.

With various symbolic significances "angels" are, however, quite frequently mentioned in the extensive Arabic and Persian Bábí-Bahá'í scriptural writings; those deriving from Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892; founder of the Bahá'í religion) and His slighter younger contemporary, Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad Shírázī, the Báb (1917-1850; the founder of the short lived, 20 year or so Bábí religion). Angels of various kinds are basically divine agents, messengers, who are very frequently mentioned in Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian and Islamic) and other religious and philosophical texts.

A vast angelological literature has existed from antiquity and continues to proliferate. Today, it is actually quite "trendy" to know about or experience angels. In various Islamic and other sources angels are said to have been created from (celestial) "light" and have diverse functions, including the performance of laudatory cosmological, envoy mediatory and other services. They were believed to "sing" the praises of the divine Creator in ways that have a positive, creative dynamic. From ancient times religious texts have related angels with light[s], colors and the performance of theologically meaningful cosmic functions.

## Colors

A precise and concise definition of "color" is "a sensation of light induced in the eye by electromagnetic waves of a certain frequency — the color being determined by the frequency" (CED [1988]: 283). Light, color, colored lights are aspects of the same phenomenon. "Light" can exist in various colors. Light is more than simply "the agency by which things are rendered visible" (as a basic definition has it); it being something rather complex.<sup>1</sup> In basic terms, as indicated, it is "electromagnetic radiation capable of producing visual sensation" (CED: 826). There are many fascinating aspects of "light" that cannot be gone into here. It will simply be noted that it 'travels' at a phenomenal speed — it can circumambulate the equator in less than 1/7<sup>th</sup> of a second; its speed in a vacuum is apparently  $2.997 \times 10^{10}$  cm. sec. (MDHS: 238) Bypassing the modern technicalities of quantum electrodynamics and wave particle duality issues, "light," it should be noted, has been given countless definitions throughout the ages. So too has the phenomenon of color and the diversity of colors.<sup>2</sup>

## Light actual and Light mystical in religious scripture

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . .*

*And God said, "Let there be Light"; and there was light. (Gen 1:1, 3)*

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר

The opening book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis, has it that God created “light” (Heb. *awr*) on the very first of the six days of creation though He did not create the “sun” until the “fourth day” (see Gen 1:14-19). From antiquity what manner of primordial “light” this was has been a subject of cosmological and theological controversy. This especially since the physical “sun” was not something initially called into being. Light and darkness were differentiated on day two of creation as was the positioning of the **רָקִיעַ** (Heb.) *raqí‘a*, the light-radiating (loosely) “firmament,” “expanse,” “vault” or “sky.” This phenomenon as can be learned from ancient cosmologies is a solid dome-like “expanse” which arches over the earth.

The Hebrew and Aramaic Jewish mystical text named the *Sepher ha-Zohar* (“The Book of Splendour”) attributed to Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (fl. 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE., but actually written by the Spanish kabbalist Moses de Leon, ca. 1240-1305), makes a major shift in its deep qabbalistic exegesis of Gen 1:1ff. when the implications of the divine words “And God said, ‘Let there be Light’” (Gen 1:3 cf. 1:14) are reached (see *Zohar*, Bereshit I.16bf., I.31b-32a; Sperling, trans. 1:68f; Tishby, *Zohar* III:585f). From this point it is reckoned “we can begin to discover hidden things relating to the creation of the world in detail” (ibid).

The jussive Hebrew phrase of command, **יְהִי**, “Let there be [Light]” is expressed by 3 Hebrew letters derived from the Hebrew verb ‘to be’; namely,

[1] **י** *yod* [2] **ה** *he* and [3] **י** *yod*. When vowelized and pronounced “*yehi*” these three letters signify “Let there be!” (Gen 1:3a). In the *Zohar* the thrust and position these three letters of *yehi* (= Y-H-Y) indicates the “union of the Father” (= the first *yod* = the sephiroth *ḥokmah* = “wisdom”) and the “Mother” (= the *he* = the sephiroth *binah* = “understanding”).

The second occurrence of the letter *yod* in *yehi* (= Y-H-Y), “Let there be!” is believed to indicate a new beginning. Indeed, the *Zohar* continues to mention that this new beginning is seen when the Hebrew word for “Light” (A-W-R) integrates this (second) Hebrew letter *yod* within itself. It then becomes the four letter Hebrew word A-W-I-R which means “air,” “atmosphere,” “supernal air” or (loosely) “ether” (cf. Tishby, *Zohar* 1:314f). This configuration also relates the genesis of “Light” to that hypostatic reality which is foremost, that is “wisdom,” which, in Jewish mysticism, is often regarded as the first of the ten sephiroth (see Tishby, *ibid* fns).

The *Zohar* further interprets the “light” of Gen 1:3 with “the light of the eye.” It was shown to the first man Adam who could thereby see from “one end of the world to the other” (*Zohar* 1.31b). All human beings have seen, have visually experienced, things. They are aware that they are wholly dependent upon “light”; primarily through its major terrestrial source, the “Sun.” Everyone knows that light exists and is fundamental to life. Both outward and inward “light” and “life” are closely associated together. Thus, for example, we read in

the magnificent prologue to the fourth Gospel of John, “In him [Jesus, the Divine Logos] was life and the life was the light of men” (John 1:3).

The sacred books have it that just as we cannot live without physical light we likewise cannot truly have “faith” and live spiritually without a relationship to the “Sun of Truth.” For Bahá’ís this metaphor is indicative of the Logos-Reality (*nafs*) of the divine manifestation of God (*mazhar-i iláhí*) which, they believe, illuminates everything seen and unseen. Relative to earthly life the “sun” is the orb of light around the life and being of which all earthly things revolve. The light-beaming Sun is the origin of everything, their quintessence and their symbolic goal. The opening of the Qur’anic Light Verse (Q. 24:35) reflects the statement made in the First Epistle of John (1 John), that “God is Light” (1 Jn 1:5). In splendid metaphorical rhyming prose, the Qur’án even has it that that there exists “light upon light” (*núr ‘alá núr*). Thus we read in the celebrated and much commented upon “Light verse” (Q. 24:35):

نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ اللَّهُ

God is the Light of the heavens and of the earth

مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ

The likeness of His Light is even as [the light streaming from] a niche (*mishkat*) containing a lamp (*al-miṣbāḥ*);

المِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ

the lamp (*al-miṣbāḥ*) is in a glass (*zujájat*),

الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ

the glass even as a resplendent Star (*kawkáb durriya*)

يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ

enkindled from the oil (*zaytún*), of a blessed Tree (*shajarat mubáraka*) [an olive]

لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ

neither of the East nor of the West.

يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ

Its oil (*zaytuhá*) well nigh radiates forth – even though it [Fire] hardly touches it.

نَارٌ نُّورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ

It is Light upon Light [and]

يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ

God guideth unto His Light whomsoever He willeth.

اللَّهُ الْأَمْتَالِ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ وَيَضْرِبُ

And God [does indeed] strike similitudes (*al-amthál*) for the people for God is aware of it all things.

In Arabic, Persian and other languages, many fascinating commentaries have been written upon this verse by scores of Muslim Qur’án commentators. The Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ often

cited it. They variously interpreted this much celebrated “Light verse.” In his early Khuṭba al-Jidda (Sermon at Jeddah) the Báb creatively drew upon the Light verse when He listed and highlighted the magnificence of His early revelations. He also wrote a number of commentaries upon Qur’án 24:35 finding deep spiritual significances in the *abjad* numerological relationships between the Arabic words for *núr* (“light” abjad, 256) and *nár* (“fire” abjad 251). These two words indicative of “heaven” and “hell” differ by a value of five. Light is 256 (=light) and Fire 251 (=fire), abjad 5 being the difference and 5 being abjad of Báb (=2+1+2 = B+a+b = 5). This difference then, can indicate the messianic “Gate” or the person of Sayyid ‘Alí Muḥammad Shirazi, the Báb. The Báb is Himself the “Gate” to the divine mysteries.

In His Tafsír áyat al-núr (Commentary upon the Light Verse) or Tafsír al-hurúfát al-muqatta‘ah (Commentary on the Isolated Letters), Bahá’u’lláh also found deep intimations of the advent of the Báb and other lofty matters in the light verse (see bib.). He responded to His questioner, the early Bábí believer and Bahá’í martyr [Ḥajj] Áqá Mírzá [Áqá] Rikab-Sáz Shírází, in the following manner:

*Then know thou that that which thou hast asked concerning the “Light Verse” [Qur’án 24:35] which was sent down upon Muḥammad, the Messenger of God aforetime, concerns a verse the comprehension of which the worlds cannot sustain.*

Bahá’u’lláh continued by saying,

*Even if whatever lieth within God’s knowledge became “Pens” and all that has been decreed became oceans of “Ink” and the Fingers of Might wrote [its mysteries] for all time, this would not suffice to exhaust even a single letter of the meaning of this honorable and blessed verse which hath been revealed by the Tongue of Grandeur.*

He further added,

*Nevertheless, I shall cause to be sprinkled down upon thee a dew-drop from the fathomless ocean of the sea of knowledge and wisdom in order that thou might be amongst those who have hastened to the plains of knowledge and who have drunk deep of the goblet of Divine Favour from the hand of the Youth seated upon the Throne of Paradise.<sup>3</sup>*

Islamic tradition has it, according to a prophetic *hadíth*, that God is wrapped in 70,000 (the number varies here) veils of “Light” and “Darkness.” Interestingly, for some Sufi mystics there exists a mysterious “black light.” Just as this unusual motif is found in the Jewish *Sepher ha-Zohar*, so it, for example, occurs in the writings of the Sufi ‘Ayn al-Quḍát al-Hamadání (d. 526/1131) who viewed the “dark” reality as a phenomenon located behind the heavenly Throne of God (see Bowering, ‘Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani’ Elr. III:140ff). Additionally, there are thought to be various colored lights associated with and even constituting the Divine Throne (*al-‘arsh*). One cosmologi-

cally interesting Islamic tradition associates the Divine Throne, Light and Angelic beings and reads as follows:

*God – exalted be He – created the [Divine] Throne (al-‘arsh) from His Light (núr) and the [celestial] Seat [Chair] (al-kursí) conjoined (al-mutaṣiq) to the [this Divine] Throne (al-‘arsh). Around the [Divine] Throne (al-‘arsh) are Four Streams [Rivers] (anhar): [1] a River of Light (núr) which glis-tens, [2] a River of Fire which flames up [burns], [3] a River of White Ice (al-thalj al-abyaḍ), and [4] a River of [cosmic] Water (al-má’). Angels do rise up within these rivers giving praise [to God].*

Tafsír of Ibn ‘Abí Khátim  
cited *Badá’ al-zuhúr*

Light concepts became central to a good many systems of Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism. In this respect it will be pertinent, by way of example, to make mention of the founder of the Ishráqí (Oriental) system of philosophy and gnosis founded by the martyred medieval thinker Shiháb al-Dín Yaḥyá Suhrawardí (d. 587/1191). This founder of the *Ishráqiyyún* (the ‘Illuminationist school’), sometimes combines elements of Shí‘í theology, Sufi gnosis, Islamic peripatetic philosophy, Zoroastrian thought and the Hellenistic Hermetic tradition. He is especially famous for his philosophy of illumination as expounded in his weighty *Hikmat al-Ishráq* (The Wisdom of Illumination). Light is central and fundamental to his theology, philosophy, cosmology and prophetology.

It is in Suhrawardí’s *Hikmat al-Ishráq*

that the probably Jewish-rooted term **هورقليا** which is often read *hurqalyá* or *hawarqalyá* occurs once. In its abberant Arabic form **هورقليا** was associated by Suhrawardí in the *Hikmat al-Ishráq* with the “eighth clime” and with the cosmic, supernatural cites of the shadowy inter-worlds Jábulqa [á] and Jábarsa [ṣá] (the Arabic spellings sometimes vary).

This word **هورقليا** appears to be a slightly garbled Arabic transliteration of the aforementioned biblical Hebrew **הַרְקִיעַ** = *ha-ráqîa* (= *hawaqalya* = *hurqalya* see Gen. 1:4b), meaning the firmament, vault, atmosphere or sky which is clearly identified with heaven and separates the earthly and celestial waters (see Gen. 1:6ff).

This Hebrew word **הַרְקִיעַ** = *ha-ráqîa* is translated “the firmament” in the Authorized (King James, 1611) version of the Bible. In various Rabbinic texts and Jewish mystical traditions the expanse that is the “firmament” (“air”) and “heaven” has a very close association with bright light and with the sun.<sup>4</sup> It is understood to signify a dazzlingly radiant light-beaming cosmic phenomenon also being a kind of luminous “inter-world,” betwixt earth and heaven. Thus, the *Sepher ha Zohar* (“Book of Splendour”) (see above), for example, several times identifies the (Heb./Aram) *ráqîa*’ (“firmament”) as a reality of stunning brightness (Zohar 1:15aff). This important Jewish mystical text appropriately cites Dan 12:3 in this connection. The Zohar appropriately cites Dan 12:3 in asserting that the **מְשִׁכִּלִים** (*mashk-ilím*, the “wise”) “shall shine (*yázhiru*)

like the brightness of the “firmament,” the **הַרְקִיעַ** (*zohar há ráqîa’*)” (*Berachoth*, 1.16aff).

In view of its cosmological and other senses **הַרְקִיעַ** would not have been inappropriately adopted in an Ishráqí cosmology of light.<sup>5</sup> **هورقليا**, *hawaqalya/húrqalyá* became important term in Shaykhí mystical cosmology and hermeneutics. It indicated the sphere of the eschatological resurrection “body.” It was adopted by Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-Abidin al-Ahsá’í (d. 1826) in its sense of “interworld” (see JK 1/ii, 103). *Hurqalyá* does not, however, appear to have been directly adopted in the Bábí Bahá’í demythologization of latter day “resurrection” motifs.<sup>6</sup>

## The Divine Throne and the Angels in Select Shí’í Islamic Hadíth

Within Shí’í hadíth collections there are many fascinating statements about the divine Throne (*‘arsh*) or “Seat,” “Chair” the (Arab.) *kursí*. It is sometimes far more than just an object for sitting upon:

I inquired of Abu ‘Abd-Allah [=Ja‘far al-Sadiq the 6<sup>th</sup> Imám] . . . regarding the verse of God, the Almighty, the Great, “His *kursí* (“Seat,” “Chair”) comprises the heavens and earth” (Q. 2:255). The Imám replied, ‘O Fuḍayl, all things, the heavens and the earth, all are within the *kursí*.’”

I inquired of Abu ‘Abd-Allah (=Ja‘far al-Sadiq) . . . regarding the words of God, the Almighty the Great, “His Chair comprises the

heavens and earth” [= Q. 2:255]; ‘Do the heavens and the earth include the *kursí* (“Seat,” “Chair”) or does the *kursí* include the heavens and the earth?’ The Imám replied: ‘It is the *kursí* which comprises the heavens, the earth and the Throne. The *kursí* (also) includes every (other) thing.’

It will be seen below that throne cosmology and throne mysticism is closely related to ideas about colour as mediated by angels. First a note about colour terminology in Arabic.

## Color terminology

The second edition of the Brill produced *Encyclopedia of Islam* (EI<sup>2</sup>) contains an excellent article “LAWN,” “color,” by A. Morbiya. It opens by stating that “one of the distinctive features of the Arabic language is the great richness of its chromatic vocabulary. It is as if the smallest detail, the most minute nuance, was deemed to require a nomenclature *sui generis*.” The article goes on to undertake “a morphological and semantic analysis of the names of colors” and sums up ways in which “Muslim thinkers, theologians and philosophers, have analysed perception of colors” ending with “the symbolic dimension of colors.”

A few further extracts from this entry are worth citing,

The **morphology** of adjectives of colour is characterised by the fact that they are, in the majority of cases, formed on the diptote paradigm af‘al in the masculine, fa‘lá’



in the feminine. The af’al theme is a theme of intensity, which also supplies the elative; this common formulation of the intensive and of the adjective of colour is apparently not coincidental, and it is asserted that, semantically, the latter may have been regarded, at a certain stage in the evolution of the language, as an intensive: that which we translate as “red” may, originally, have signified “more red than . . .”

Note also from the same article these fascinating aspects of Arabic color terminology:

Of the derived forms of the Arabic verb there are two of the paradigms if’alla and if’álla which have a particular quality: they express states (colour or deformity); they do not derive from the “bare form” fa’ala, but are denominative in origin, formed from adjectives of the paradigm af’al expressing the states cited above; and they denote an intensive aspect which is illustrated by the doubling of the final radical. The Xlth form (if’álla), less common than the IXth (if’alla) seems to be a doublet of it, still more intensive. Thus we have, besides *ibyaḍḍa* and *iswaḍḍa*, meaning respectively “to become white,” “to become black,” *ibyaḍḍa* and *iswaḍḍa*, for “to become pure white,” “to become black as ebony.”

Ibid. Morbiya, *El*<sup>2</sup> Vol. IV: 698-707

## The Hadíth of the Angelic Throne of Lights

The following notes pertinent to aspects of the Islamic/Shaykhí background and Bábí-Bahá’í uses of colour symbolism will help to broaden and deepen the theme of the relationships between angelology, throne and colour symbolism – themes and motifs which need not always be so interrelated. In Shaykhí and Bábí-Bahá’í sources such relationships can often be traced back to a seminal and very influential Islamic tradition recording a dialogue between Imám ‘Alí (d. 40 / 662) the son in law and (for Shí’is Muslims and Bahá’is) the immediate successor of the Prophet Muḥammad, and a Catholic Christian. Their dialogue concerned the nature of God’s enthronement. This influential tradition is recorded in the *Usul al-Káfi* of Kulayni vol.1 I:129-130 and (among other places) the *Biḥár al-anwár* (“Oceans of Lights”) of Muḥammad Báqir Majlisí (d. 1699) (see *Biḥár*<sup>7</sup> 58:9-10). The Christian questioned Imám ‘Alí about the nature of God and his possible holding up, His bearing the divine Throne (*al-‘arsh*). In the course of the dialogue the Imám came to express the view that the divine Throne (*al-‘arsh*) is supported or constituted of four celestial lights; [1] red light (*núr ḥamrá’*); [2] green light (*núr akhḍar*); [3] yellow light (*al-núr aṣfar*) and [4] white light (*núr bayáḍ*).

...The Commander of the Faithful [Imám ‘Alí] said: . . . ‘God, exalted and glorified be He, is the bearer of the Throne (*ḥámil al-‘arsh*)

and the heavens and the earth and what lieth within and between them. Such [is in accordance with] the statement of God [in the Qur'án]: "God holds in position the heavens and the earth lest they should deviate; and should they deviate there would be none to hold them in place aside from Him. He hath ever been the One Clement and Forgiving" (Q. 35:41).

At this [the Catholic] responded and said, 'Then inform me about His [Qur'anic] saying, "and eight of them [angels] shall bear aloft the Throne of thy Lord (*'arsh rab-bika*) above them" (Q. 69:17). How can this be when you have said [citing the Qur'án] that He beareth the Throne and the heavens and the earth?

He [Imám 'Alí] said: 'The [celestial divine] Throne (*al-'arsh*) was created by God — blessed and exalted be He — from four Lights (*anwár*): [1] a Crimson [Red] Light (*núr aḥmar*) by means of which redness (*al-ḥumra*) was reddened; [2] the Green Light (*núr al-akhḍar*) by means of which greenness (*al-khudra*) was made green; [3] the Yellow Light (*al-núr al-aṣfar*) by means of which yellowness (*al-ṣufra*) was yellowed and [4] the [Snow-] White Light (*al-núr al-abayḍ*) through which whiteness (*al-bayáḍ*) is [whitened] realized. This [Light-Throne phenomenon] is the knowledge (*huwa al-'ilm*) which God, the Bearer (*al-ḥamla*) [imparts to] such as are empowered to uphold it [the Throne]. And that Light (*al-núr*) [=knowledge] is of the Light of His

Grandeur (*min núr 'azimat*) and of His Power (*qudrat*). . . .'

Wherefore hath all that hath been born aloft been born aloft by God by virtue of His Light, His Grandeur and His Power. Of their own selves (*li-nafsihi*) [these realities] have no power to [actualize either] misfortune [injury, damage] or benefit [good]; neither do they have the power of [bestowing] life (*ḥayát*) or resurrection [from the dead]. Hence, everything is upheld [born aloft, actualized by God]. God, exalted and glorified be He is the One Who supports these twain [the heavens and the earth, lest they dislodge] and the One Who encompasses them both and everything [besides]. He is the Life [giver] of everything and the Light of all things "So praised and exalted be He above that which they assert." (Q. 17:43).

'Alí subsequently informs the Christian that

Those who bear the Throne (*al-'arsh*) are the learned (*al-'ulamá'*) whom God gave the capacity to bear His knowledge. There is naught that emergeth from these four things (the [1] Throne, [2] the Chair, [3] the Heavens and [4] the Earth) which God has created in His Kingdom, save that which God intended for His chosen ones (*al-aṣfiyá'*) and which He showed unto His friend (Abraham) as He says (in the Qur'án), "So We were showing Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and earth, that he might be of those having sure faith" (Q. 6:75). How can it be



possible that the bearer[s] of the Throne (*ḥamlat al-‘arsh*) bear God (Himself) through Whose Life is the [very] life of their [own] hearts and through Whose Light they are guided unto the gnosis [knowledge] of Him [God] (*ma‘rifatihi*).

Kulaynī, Kāfī I:129 130;  
Majlisī, Biḥār, 58:9-10).

### The Celestial Throne and the Angels

From early on in the evolution of Islamic (Shī‘ī-Zaydī) Qur’án exegesis biblical materials were assimilated into qur’anic exegesis. Muqátil b. Sulaymán (d. Basra c.150/767), probably an early Zaydī exegete, commenting upon a phrase of the celebrated ‘Throne Verse’ (*áyat al-kursí* = Q. 2:255) – the part which reads, “His [God’s] Seat [Chair, Throne] (*kursí*) encompasses the heavens and the earth and He is not burdened by sustaining both in existence” states as follows, without *iṣnád* (but from the *Isrá‘iliyyát* of Wahb b. Munabbih taken from the ahl al-kitáb = Jews or Christians):

Four angels bear the [divine] Throne (*kursí*); every angel hath four faces (*arba‘at wujúh*). Their feet [legs] (*aqdám*) are [situated] beneath the [foundational] Rock (*al-saḥra*) which lieth beneath the lowest earth (*al-arḍ al-suflá*) extending [for the distance of] a 500 year journey (*masíra[t] khamsmá‘at ‘ám*); and between all [of the 7] earth[s] is a 500 year journey!

(1) [There is] an angel whose face

hath the appearance of a man [human form] (*‘malak wajhihi alá ṣúrat al-insán*). He had the archetypal form (? *wa huwa sayyid al-suwar*). Of God he requests sustenance for the progeny of Adam (*al-rizq li‘l ádamiyyín*).

(2) [There is] an angel whose face hath the appearance of the exemplar of [master, lord of] cattle [cf. Q. 6] (*‘malak wajhihi alá ṣúrat sayyid al-an‘ám*) which is the ox (*wa huwa al-thawr*). Of God he requests sustenance for the cattle [animals] (*al-bahá ‘im*).

(3) [There is] an angel whose face hath the appearance of the exemplar of [master, lord of] the birds (*sayyid al-ṭayr*) (*‘malak wajhihi alá ṣúrat sayyid al-ṭawr*) which is the eagle [vulture] (*wa huwa al-nasr*). Of God he requests sustenance for the birds (*al-ṭayr*) . . .

(4) [There is] an angel whose face hath the appearance of the exemplar [master, lord of] of beasts of prey (*‘malak wajhihi alá ṣúrat sayyid al-sibá‘*) which is the lion (*wa huwa al-asad*). Of God he requests sustenance for the beats of prey (*al-sibá‘*).

Muqátil b. Sulaymán, *Tafsír*  
I:213 on Q. 2:255b cf. V:222

This exegesis is obviously directly or indirectly much influenced by the Ezekiel’s quasi-cosmological *merkabáh* (‘throne-chariot’) vision contained in the 1st chapter of the book of the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Chap. 10, etc). Ezekiel 1:10 speaks of the four faces of the four creatures which he visioned.

(5b) out of the midst thereof came

*the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. (6) And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. . . . (10) As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man [in the front], and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle [at the back].*

The Bible, King James Version

This Merkabah ([Throne] Chariot) vision was foundational for various traditions expressive of Jewish Merkabah mysticism and the Christian vision of John of Patmos of the ‘four living creatures’ about the celestial throne recorded in Rev 4:6b-9.

Jews, Christians and Muslims have all developed interesting mystical doctrines about the divine Throne. Often they can be seen to have transformed earlier traditions rooted in the Bible and various post-biblical traditions.

In Islam the celestial throne of God is of central cosmological importance. It was given a variety of symbolic and esoteric significances by the Twelver Imáms and numerous Sufi thinkers, philosophers and mystagogues. In his *Mirát al-anwár* (‘Mirror of Lights’) the Shí’ite theologian and Qur’án exegete Abú’l-Ḥasan al-‘Ámilí al-Iṣfahání (d. Najaf 1138/1726) records that *al-‘arsh* (among other things) is borne by the the Prophet and the Imáms who are the bearers [custodians] of the knowledge of God the locus of which is the ‘*arsh* (“Throne”) (‘Ámilí

Iṣfahání, *Mirat*, I:236-7).

## Commentary of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá’í

A portion of the above cited tradition was cited and commented upon in some detail by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá’í (d. 1826) in one of his epistles written in reply to to the ‘The Brethren from Isfahan.’<sup>8</sup> Interpreting the four “Lights” (*al-anwár*) (sing. *núr*) mentioned by Imám ‘Alí, Shaykh Aḥmad has it that “the confluence of these four Lights constitutes the “Throne” (*al-‘arsh*) in its totality.” He states that the “white Light” (*al-núr al-abyáḍ*) is the most elevated [transcendent] (*al-a‘lá*) [reality] situated at the right-hand side of the Throne [of God] (*yamín al-‘arsh*) placing the other three lights—yellow Light (*al-núr al-aṣṣfar*); green Light (*al-núr al-akhḍar*) and red-crimson Light (*al-núr al-aḥmar*) — in a supportive tetradic configuration. These four Lights are interpreted as the four laudatory exclamations:

- (1) *subḥán Alláh* (“Glorified be God”) = White Light-Pillar (*al-abyáḍ*)
- (2) *al-ḥamdu liláh* (“Praised be God”) = Yellow Light-Pillar (*al-aṣṣfar*)
- (3) *lá iláha ilá Alláh* (“There is none other god but God”) = Green Light-Pillar (*al-akhḍar*)
- (4) *Alláh al-akbar* (“God is Greatest”) = Crimson Light-Pillar (*al-aḥmar*)

As four Pillars (*al-arkán*) they constitute the totality of established existence (*jamí‘ al-wujúd al-muqayyad*) whose

beginning is the First Intellect (*al-‘aql al-awwal*) and whose end is the [dusty] earth (*al-thurá*). God established an [Arch-] Angel (*malak*) “for every Pillar so as to bear it”; namely,

- [3] Seraphiel (?) (Isrá’fíl [“Angel of last Trump”]) = White
- [2] Michael [Míká’íl] = Yellow
- [4] Azrael [‘Azrá’íl (Principal) Angel of Death] = Green
- [1] Gabriel [Jibríl] = Red

The Shaykh reckoned that “The meaning of [‘Alí’s saying] “He [God] bore it aloft” is that His gravitas was focused into this (these) [Arch-] Angel”(s) every [Arch-] Angel having subsidiary hosts of angels (*junúd min malá’ika*) “the number of which none can estimate except God” (Ibid). For Shaykh Aḥmad God indirectly bore the “Throne” through the four [Arch-] Angels and their celestial hosts.

Shaykh Ahmad further expounded these matters as follows:

Know thou that the Throne (*al-‘arsh*) is indicative and suggestive of an intricate support (*ma‘án<sup>an</sup> mukhtlifa*) . . . and the confluence of these four lights constituteth the Throne (*al-‘arsh*) in its totality. The [Snow-] White Light (*al-núr al-abyád*) is the most elevated [transcendent] (*al-a‘lá*) [reality] and is at the right-hand side of the Throne (*yamín al-‘arsh*); that is to say, its right-hand Pillar [Support] (*rukṇ*). The Yellow Light (*al-núr al-aṣfar*) lieth beneath it while the Green Light (*al-núr al-akhḍar*) is at the left-hand side of the Throne (*yasár al-‘arsh*) and is its left-hand Pillar [Support] (*rukṇ*). The

Crimson Light (*al-núr al-aḥmar*) lieth beneath it such that the Yellow Light (*al-núr al-aṣfar*) is the right-hand Pillar [Support] (*rukṇ*) beneath the White (*al-abyád*). The Crimson Light (*al-núr al-aḥmar*) is the left-hand Pillar [Support] (*rukṇ*) beneath the Green (*al-abyád*).

These four Lights are *subḥán Alláh* (“Glorified be God”) which is the “White” [Light-Pillar] (*al-abyád*). *Al-ḥamdu liláh* (“Praised be God”) is the Yellow [Light-Pillar] (*al-aṣfar*) while *lá iláha ilá Alláh* (“There is none other god but God”) is the Green [Light-Pillar] (*al-akhḍar*) and *Alláh al-akbar* (“God is Greatest”) is the crimson [Light-Pillar] (*al-aḥmar*).

These Four Pillars (*al-arkán*) constitute the totality of established existence (*jamí‘ al-wujúd al-muqayyad*) whose beginning is the First Intellect (*al-‘aql al-awwal*) and whose end is the [dusty] earth (*al-thurá*). He [God] — glorified be He — set up an [arch-] Angel (*malak*) for every Pillar so as to bear it. They are [1] Gabriel [Jibríl], [2] Michael [Míká’íl], [3] Isrá’fíl and [4] ‘Azrá’íl. The meaning of [‘Alí’s saying] “He [God] bore it aloft” is that His gravitas was focused into this [Arch-] Angel. And for every [Arch-] Angel there are [subsidiary] hosts of angels (*junúd min malá’ika*) the number of which none can estimate except God.

The Four varieties of coloured Lights are separately commented upon by Shaykh Aḥmad in considerable detail. It must suffice here to focus on a portion

of his alchemically informed comment regarding the red or Crimson Light:

And [now regarding] the Crimson [red] Light (*al-núr al-aḥmar*). It is an Angel (*malak*) [derived] from the [snow-] white Light (*al-núr al-abyaḍ*) and the Yellow Light (*al-núr al-aṣfar*). They [alchemists] say that redness (*al-ḥumra*) is born of these two [coloured lights] and they deduce that through redness cinnabar [sulphide of mercury] (*bi-ḥumra al-zunjufr*) [results] for this is of mercury (*huwa min al-zaybaq*) and yellow sulphur (*al-kibrít al-aṣfar*). . . .

### The Báb and the ‘Hadíth of the Throne of Lights’

The Báb (1819-1850) was very much influenced by aforementioned ‘Hadíth of the Throne of Lights’ originally uttered by Imám ‘Alí in dialogue with a Christian and mystically interpreted by the first two major figures of al-Shaykhiyya (Shaykhism). Even before He declared His mission on May 22 1844 before Mullá Husayn, it is the case that, towards the very beginning of the first supplicatory introduction to His earliest extant, pre-declaration (early 1844) *Tafsir Surat al-Baqara* (“Commentary on the Sura of the Cow” Q. II), the Báb writes,

*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.*

*Praised be to God Who manifested himself (tajalla) unto the spheres of existent Being (al-mumkinát) through the ornament of the differentiated [disengaged] Point (bi-*

*ṭaraz al-nuqṭat al-mumfaṣilat) [sprung] out of the abyss of origination (lujjat al-ibdá’) – unto, in and towards Existent Being . . .*

*... Through it He created the duality [pairing; marriage] (zawjiyya) and He created “I-ness” [individuality] (al-aniyya), And the Divine Will (al-mashiyya) was mentioned through the Dhikr of the Eternal [cosmic] alphabet, (bi-dhikr al-handasah al-azaliyya) which is other than God. And it, it is indeed (fa-hiya hiya) the Primordial Eternity (al-azaliyya al-awwaliyya) without termination of eternality. Nay rather! It, it is [indeed] the Dawning Place of the Sun of the Divine Oneness (shams al-ahadiyya) glistening forth from the Eternal Perpetuity (al-ṣamadániyya al-báqiyya) through the Eternity of the Divine Ipseity (bi-baqá’ al-huwiyya) [which is] of the Empyrean domain (al-jabarútiyya).*

*So Oh! Truly wondrous [fairest] Ornament (fa-ya na’ma al-ṭaráz) of the Snow-white “A” (alif al-bayḍá’) coming into being subsequent to the [primordial phenomenon of the] differentiated Point [itself sprung] out of the Creative Reality.*

*Thus, it, it is indeed of the Ornament of Bahá’ (“Glory-Beauty”) (al-ṭaráz al-bahá’) in the Pillar of Laudation (rukṇ al-thaná’)!*

*Then indeed it, it is assuredly the Yellow Ornament (al-ṭaráz al-safrá’) in the Snow-White Pillar (rukṇ al-bayḍá’)! [YELLOW+WHITE]*

Wherefore indeed it, it is the Ornament of Origination (al-ṭaráz al-badá’) in the Green Pillar (rukn al-khuḍrá’)!

Then [also] it is assuredly the Ornament of Origination (al-ṭaráz al-badá’) in the Soul of the Crimson Pillar (fī nafs al-ḥamrá’)! [GREEN+RED]

Shouldst thou say [RED] Crimson (al-ḥamrá’) then would it be ornamented [coloured as] Yellow through the [effect of the] Snow-White (al-safrá’ bi’l-bayḍá’). And shouldst thou say Green (al-khuḍrá’) it would [indeed] be ornamented [coloured as] Snow-White (al-bayḍá’) through the [effect of] the Crimson (bi’l-ḥamrá’) So Oh! Blessed be this [Reality] for it, it is:

[1] [the power] of eternal reddening (muḥammirat azaliyya); [RED/CRIMSON]

[2] the [power] of perpetual whitening (mubayyiḍat šamadiyya), [SNOW-WHITE]

[3] [the] originative greenness (mukhaḍḍirat a[i]badiyya); [GREEN]

[4] and the [power] of heavenly yellowing (mušaffirat malakútiyya). [YELLOW]

Again, It, it is assuredly the reiteration of the Point in the outstretched [letter] “A” through the pre-existent creative Power. And “no God is there except Him. . . .

Iranian National Bahá’í Archives  
Manuscript Collection 69/II:2-3

## Tafsír (al-ḥurúf al-) Basmalah

Towards the beginning of His Tafsir *Basmalah* (c. 1845-6?) and also at the end of this detailed commentary on “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate” the influence of the symbolism of the four lights is evident as it is in the course of the Báb’s detailed ‘qabbalistic’, letter by letter commentary. Some 22 pages into this work in one of the mss. (6014C Pt. II) the Báb mentions that God is operative according to a tetradic configuration as “He Who[1] created thee; [2] then gave thee sustenance; [3] then caused thee to expire then [4] brought thee back to life.” (319)

The Báb then continues,

*Creation (al-khalq) deriveth from the denizens of the snow-white dome (ahl qubbat al-bayḍá’); providence [sustenance] (al-rizq) deriveth from the denizens of the yellow dome (ahl qubbat al-bayḍá’); life (la-hayát) deriveth from the denizens of the green dome (ahl qubbat al-khaḍrá’) while expiration [death] (al-mamát) cometh from the denizens of the crimson dome (ahl qubbat al-ḥamra).*

In the concluding prayer towards the very end of His Tafsir *Basmalah*, the Báb says (371):

*Thus She [It] is She [It] (fa-hiya hiya) [which is] [1] Crimson (ḥamrá’), [2] Yellow (safrá’), [3] Green (khaḍrá’) and [4] Snow-white (bayḍá’). They [the Angelic Lights] [do indeed] cry out above their Throne (‘arsh) in praise of their Creator (al-badá’) through*

*their vocalization of ‘There is no God except Him (lá iláha ilá huwa)! So Praised be God who made the ornament of His authorization the splendour-beauty of Lordship (bahá’ al-rabbániyya).*

The gravity of the Deity is here lauded by a tetradic color configuration which is an expression of angelic or archangelic laudation of the oneness of God.

### ***Tafsír súrat al-aṣr* (“Commentary on the Súrah of the Era [Declining Day]”)**

In His detailed sometimes letter by letter (73 letters) commentary upon the 103<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Qur’án, the *Tafsír súrat al-aṣr* (“Commentary on the Súrah of the the Era [Declining Day] cf. Lawson, 1997), the Báb quite definitely, a number of times exhibits the influence of light mysticism. The letter “N” (*nún*) occurs and is interpreted five times interpreted as *núr* (“light”) (see below, commentary on letters 8+12+15+29+32).

### **Commentary on the letter *nún*, letter no. 8**

Here the “N” is the “Light of God” (*núr Alláh*) “on the level of the essences of the theophanies of the realities of the divine realm . . . (*fí maqám jawhariyyát al-tajilliyyát al-láhútiyya*).” The Báb continues this on the levels of [2] Jabarút, [3] Malakút and [4] Nasút. He also cites Qur’án cites 24:35, the “Light Verse.”

### **Commentary on the letter *nún*,**

### **letter no. 12 (abjad value = 50)**

Interpreting its second occurrence as the 12<sup>th</sup> letter “N” understood to be indicative of “Light” *Núr*, the Báb gives the letter four light oriented senses.

*The twelfth letter [of the Sura 103] is the letter “N” (al-nun) which [signifies]:*

*[1] the Pristine Light (al-núr al-baḥt) in the Dawning Place of the Theophany of the [sacred] Presence of the Divine Essence (ṭal‘at zuhúr ḥadrat al-dhát);*

*[2] Additionally it is the Designated Light (al-nur al-muta‘ayyin) [operating within] the world of [the Divine] Names and Attributes (‘alam al-ṣifát wa’l asmá’).*

*[3] Additionally it is the Light which pertains to (al-núr al-muta‘allaq) the third Pillar of the [Divine] Throne (al-rukṇ al-thalith min al-‘arsh) the colour (lawn) of which God made [to be] Yellow (al-aṣfar) for it lieth before [opposite] the First Pillar (fí tilqá’ al-rukṇ al-awwal) the colour of which is that of the snow white pillar (lawn al-abyaḍ).*

*[4] Then also it is the “Light” which God created in the “Lamp” (al-miṣbáḥ) (Cf. Q. 24:35) which radiates the manifestation of the colors of the [Divine] Throne (zuhúr alwán al-‘arsh) from the Yellow coloured (Light) (min lawn al-ṣufrāḥ) [which] followeth the Snow White (Light) (ba‘ad al-bayáḍ) as well as [lit. then] the Green [Light] (al-akhḍá’) which preceedeth the Crimson [Red*

*Light*] (qabl al-aḥmar).

INBMC 69:44 45.

Commenting upon the 15<sup>th</sup> letter “N” (*al-nún*) in Súrah 103 the Báb says:

*The fifteenth letter [of the Sura 103] is the letter “N” [signifieth]:*

[1] *the Snow White Light* (*al-núr al-abyaḍ*) by virtue of which is derived the snow whiteness (*abayyaḍ*) of everything Snow White (*kull al-bayáḍ*) in existence (*fi’l imkán*).

[2] *Then again it signifies the Yellow Light* (*al-núr al-aṣfar*) by virtue of which derives the yellowness (*aṣaffarat*) of everything that is Yellow in (*al-ṣufra*) in the [sphere of] Essential Reality (*fi’l a’yán*).

[3] *Then also it signifies the Green Light* (*al-núr al-akhḍar*) by virtue of which derives the greenness (*minhu aṣaffarat*) of everything that lieth in the heavens and upon the earth according to whatsoever the All Merciful intended and sent down in the *Qur’án*.

[4] *It furthermore signifies the Crimson [Red] Light* (*al-núr al-aḥmar*) by virtue of which derives the redness (*minhu aḥmarrat*) of everything that is Crimson (*al-ḥamra*) from the depth [mystery] [the sphere of] Existence (*fi’l imkán*) in the [domain of] essential Reality (*fi’l a’yán*).

In commenting upon the 26<sup>th</sup> letter *lám* the Báb states that this letter L (*lám*) signifies the “the near ones” as assembled groups, apparently understood as “inmates of celestial spheres” then the

“L” signifies a company (*lamam*) whom God made to be situated beneath

*the shadow of the Yellow Pillar* (*al-rukṇ al-aṣfar*) which is of the [Divine] Throne (*min al-‘arsh*). They are a people (*qawm*) in whom is manifest the fruit of the [Divine] “I-ness” (Identity) (*thamara al-aniyya*) for the most part among the wayfarers (*al-sálikín*) on the level of the First Pillar (*al-rukṇ al-awwal*). And thus is manifest its colour (lawn) Yellow (*al-ṣafra*).”

Then the Báb adds that the “L” signifies a company (*lamam*) whom God made to be situated beneath the shadow of the Green Light (*al-núr al-akhḍar*) which is of the third Pillar (*al-rukṇ al-thálish*) of the [Divine] Throne (*min al-‘arsh*). The same letter, furthermore, signifies a company (*lamam*) whom God made to be situated beneath the “shadow of the Crimson [Red] Light (*al-núr al-ḥamrá’*) which is of the fourth Pillar (*al-rukṇ al-rab’ah*) of the [Divine] Throne (*min al-‘arsh*).” And on that level, the Báb explains, is evident the creative effects of the Light of the first Pillar (*mubádí núr rukṇ al-awwal*) in their [its] inmost Reality (*bi ḥaqíqat*) then [also] the Pillar of the second Light through its manifestation [His theophany]; then [also] the Pillar of the third Light through its grades [His [diverse] modes] . . .”

In His commentary on the 32<sup>nd</sup> letter, *nún*, the Báb continues,

*The thirty second letter [of the Sura 103] is the letter “N” (al-nún) which signifies:*

[1] . . . *The Light of Origination* (al-núr al-ibdá'a) on the level of glorification (fi rutbah al-tasbíḥ)

[2] *Then the Light of Inventiveness* (al-núr al-ikhtirah) on the level of praise (fi rutbah al-tamḥíd);

[3] *Then [also] the Light of Everything* (al-núr al-ashyá') on the level of laudation (fi rutbah al-tahlíl);

[4] *Then [also] the Light of Beauty-Glory* (al-núr al-bahá') on the level of praise (fi rutbah al-takbír)

*The lights and the various forms of angelic laudation are here set forth.*

### Commentary on the letter *nún*, letter no. 32

*The thirty second letter [of the Sura 103] is the letter "N" (al-nún) [signifieth] [1] the Light of God (al-núr Alláh) in the Primordial "Niche" (al-mishkat al-awwal) Here we again see the influence of the qur'anic Light verse (Q. 24:35).*

### Commentary on the letter *nún*, letter no. 55

*The fifty fifth letter [of Sura 103] is the letter "A" (al-alif) which signifies [1] the hidden [letter] "A" (al-alif al-ghaybiyya) by virtue of which is derived the [snow-] whiteness (minhu abayyaḍ) of everything snow White (kull al-bayḍ) in the realm of existence*

(fi'l imkán).

In the Commentary on the letter "B" (letter no. 56) color symbolism is again in evidence:

*The fifty-sixth letter [of the Sura 103] is the letter "B" (al-alif) [it signifies] [1] the Calamity of God (al-balá' Alláh) for the people of the Crimson Sandhill (kathíb al-aḥmar) . . .*

The inmates or people of the *kathíb al-aḥmar*, the red sandhill (crimson hill) are those who seek the divine vision in eschatological times. The calamity may be their inability to envision God.

It is obvious, even from the above highly selected set of examples, that from the very outset of His mission (1844-1850) the Báb was revealing verses that echoed the tradition of the throne and its four lights as uttered by 'Alí and interpreted by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í. As will now be evident Bahá'u'lláh as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá' were also influenced by this tradition of throne and colour mysticism. Only a few examples drawn from the *Lawḥ-i kull al-ta'ám* (The Tablet of all Food) must suffice to illustrate this theme. The citations must largely speak for themselves.

### The Influence on Bahá'u'lláh of the hadíth of the Throne of Lights

It should be noted that in the *Lawḥ-i kull al-ta'ám*, the aforementioned colors are associated with the traditional Islamic hierarchy of "worlds":

[1] *Láhút*, the Snow-White Light



*It (Q. 3:87) signifieth the realm of the Paradise of Endless Duration, the Throne of the Divine Realm (Láhút), the Snow-White Light. It is the realm of "He is He Himself" and there is none other save Him. This Paradise is allotted unto those servants who are established upon the Seat of Glory, who quaff liquid camphor nigh unto the All-Beauteous One, and who recite the verses of Light in the Heaven of Manifest Justice. Thereby are they enraptured and from that "food" derive comfort.*

- [2] Jabarút, the Yellow [Golden] Land . . .

*It signifieth the Paradise of the Divine Unicity, the Golden [Yellow] Land, the Depths of realm of the Divine Omnipotence (Jabarút). [26] It is the realm of "Thou art He [God] and He [God] is Thou" allotted unto those servants who do not cried out except with the permission of God; who act according to His command and ever restrain themselves in accordance with His wisdom — just as God hath described them [in the Qur'án] for they are the honoured servants of whom it is written: "They speak not till He hath spoken; and they do His bidding" (Q. 21:27).*

- [3] Malakút, the Green [Verdant] Land . . .

*It signifieth the Paradise of Justice, the Verdant [Green] Land, the Fathomless Deep of Kingdom of God (Malakút) allotted to those servants whom "neither traffic nor merchandise beguile from the remembrance of God" (Qur'án*

*24:27) since they are the companions of the Light. They enter therein with the permission of God and find rest upon the carpet of the Almighty.*

- [4] Násút, Crimson Land, the Golden Secret, the Snow-White Mystery.

*It signifieth the realm of the Paradise of the Divine Bounty, the Crimson Land, the Golden Secret, the Snow-White Mystery and the Point of the human realm (Násút). In it are the proofs of the Remembrance greatest, if you are of those who are informed.*

In many of Bahá'u'lláh's other scriptural Tablets the color schemata and motifs which are sketched below are reinterpreted. The wide-ranging associations and senses that colour and related themes acquired through Shí'í, Shaykhí and Bábí sources again find recondite and often beautiful levels of meaning.

## Notes

The above paragraphs are portions of a lengthy monograph which will eventually be separately published.

1. Einstein's thought was early set in motion by his deep questions about "light." He wondered, for example, what it would be like to ride on the 'waves' of light.
2. That thinkers, philosophers and scientists have grappled with the definition and explanation of "colour" is, for example, indicated in the Haft Vádí or Seven Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Valley of Tawhíd (the [divine] unity) we at one point read:

*In like manner, colors become visible in every object according to the nature of that object. For instance, in a yellow globe, the rays shine yellow; in a white the rays are white; and in a red, the red rays are manifest. Then these variations are from the object, not from the shin-*

ing light. And if a place be shut away from the light, as by walls or a roof, it will be entirely bereft of the splendor of the light, nor will the sun shine thereon.

Seven Valleys and Four Valleys, 18f

3. Tafsír al-ḥurúfát al-muqaṭṭa'át (Commentary on the Isolated Letters), from [www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/BAHA'-ALLAH/L-hurufat.htm](http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/BAHA'-ALLAH/L-hurufat.htm)
4. The *Zohar* has many other things to say about the qabbalistic secrets of the word "Light" and also of the genesis of colours, even mentioning a "black light" (refer *Zohar* index).
5. Báb. Tal. Ḥagiga 12b; Bershith 17a, Midrash Rabbah, Gen. VI:6ff (cf. Samuelson, 1994[7]:118f.). The Báb. Talmudr has it that the following words were uttered by the Rabbis on parting from one of their learned associates, "may your eyes be enlightened by the light of the Torah and your face shine like the brightness of the firmament (הַרְקִיעַ) (B. Tal. Berachoth 17a).
6. Contrary to the erroneous critiques of some Islamic anti Shaykhi writers, *húrqa-lyá* is an Ishráqí cosmological term and was not an invention of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsa'í who thought it was a Syriac term used by Sabaeans such as inhabit regions near Basra in Iraq.
7. Suhrawardí's philosophy of illumination was also influential upon the Jewish convert to Islam Ibn Kammúna (d. ca. 1285) who cites the Bible frequently in his *Tanqíḥ al-abḥáthli'l milál al-thaláth* (Perlman, 1971). *Risála fí jawáb ba'di al-ikhwán min Iṣfahán* (Epistle in Reply to some of the Brethren from Isfahan) contained in *Majmú'at al-Rasá'il* 30: 193-215.

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# Karím Khán Kirmání and the Kitáb-i-Íqán

*Sholeh A. Quinn*

**T**he *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is one of the most important compositions of Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í religion. This work was written in Baghdad approx. 1-2 years (1861-2) before He made something of his theophanological claims known (from 1863 onwards). The text was originally known as *Risálah-i Khál* ("Treatise to the uncle"). It is written in Persian, with a number of Biblical, Qur'anic, and Islamic passages and quotations in Arabic. The text was translated into English as early as 1900, when 'Alí Qulí Khán translated it, apparently at the request of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, grandson and successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then translated the text into English in 1931. The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* was written in reply to certain questions posed by Hájji Mírzá Sayyid Muḥammad, one of the maternal uncles of 'Alí Muḥammad Shírází, known as the Báb, founder of the Bábí religion. Hájji Mírzá Sayyid Muḥammad was a Shi'í Muslim, not a Bábí, and unwilling to accept the Báb's claims due to certain expectations that he had regarding the nature of the Qá'im (the Shi'í Muslim Messiah) and the circumstances of His coming. He posed the questions when he passed through Baghdad with his brother, after visiting

the Shi'í holy shrines in Najaf and Karbala. We know what his questions were, because Bahá'u'lláh asked the Báb's uncle to draw up a list. Christopher Buck provides a succinct summary of these questions in his book *Symbol and Secret*:

- (1) *The Day of Resurrection*: will it be corporeal? How will the just be recompensed and wicked dealt with?
- (2) *The Twelfth Imám*: How can traditions attesting his occultation be explained?
- (3) *Quranic Interpretation*: How can literal meaning of scripture be reconciled with the interpretations current among Bábís?
- (4) *Advent of the Qá'im*: How can the apparent non-fulfillment of popular Imámí traditions concerning the Resurrector be explained?<sup>2</sup>

The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is Bahá'u'lláh's answers to these questions, which He composed within a 48-hour period. Although ostensibly composed for the Báb's uncle, Buck suggests a multiplicity of "audiences" for the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*: (1) the immediate audience of the Báb's uncle, (2) the Bábís of the time, for we see phrases such as "O people of the Bayán," and (3) the whole world, as seen in the phrase "O ye peoples of the world."<sup>3</sup>



This project began with my attempt to contextualize just one small section of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, by choosing to focus on one individual mentioned in this book. The reference appears immediately before one of the best-loved and most cherished sections of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, sometimes known as “the true seeker” section, or the “tablet of the true seeker.” The section begins as follows:

*But, O my brother, when a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.*<sup>4</sup>

It is here that Bahá'u'lláh introduces an example of what appears to be the antithesis of the true seeker, the *shakhs-i mujáhid*, and indeed He seems to juxtapose the ideal “true seeker” station towards which He states all must strive, with an account of a specific historical figure. This would be Karím Khán Kirmání, whom Bahá'u'lláh initially alludes to when He states,

*For instance, a certain man, reputed for his learning and attainments, and accounting himself as one of the pre-eminent leaders of his people, hath in his book denounced and vilified all the exponents of true learning.*<sup>5</sup>

Despite deciding that He needed to address this individual's writings, as

many people had asked Him about him, Bahá'u'lláh says that He was unable to do so because He did not have access to the author's writings. However, He tells us that eventually someone was able to locate in Baghdad a copy of the book *Irshád al-'avám* and brought it to Him.<sup>6</sup>

Karím Khán Kirmání was born in 1810 and died in 1871. He came from the Persian city of Kirman, and was the son of a Qajar prince. Kirmání's father was Ibráhím Khán Zahr al-Dawlah, and Kirmání had nineteen brothers and twenty-one sisters. This Ibráhím Khán was an admirer of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'í, founder of the Shaykhi movement, which contributed markedly to the establishment of the Bábí religion. Ibráhím Khán founded a school named after himself, the Ibrahimiyya school. When Karím Khán went to Karbala, soon after his father's death, he met Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, successor to Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'í and leader of the Shaykhi movement at the time. Karím Khán Kirmání became a disciple of Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, and eventually went back to Kirman, where he planned apparently to “teach and guide the faithful” there.<sup>7</sup>

Kirmání was an extremely learned and highly prolific individual who wrote a great deal on a wide variety of subjects. He was perhaps best known for his elaborations on the “fourth pillar,” or the “*rukṇ al-rábi'*.” Shaykh Aḥmad had already condensed the traditional “five pillars” of Shi'i Islam — (1) divine unity, (2) prophethood, (3) resurrection, (4) divine justice, and (5) the imamate—into three pillars: (1) knowledge of God, (2)

prophethood, (3) the imamate. The early Shaykhi leaders added a fourth pillar: (4) the Shi'i community or someone within that community who would offer guidance. (Sayyid Kázim saw this as an individual figure, and it was understood messianically by the Báb). Kirmání seems to have modified that fourth pillar to refer to (4) "knowledge of friends and enemies of the Imams."<sup>8</sup> Kirmání wrote a number of passages and tracts elaborating on his understandings of this fourth pillar. Other subjects he wrote on included optics, alchemy, *ḥadith*, color mysticism, prophetology, and many others.

As time passed, because of the sorts of ideas he was teaching to his students, he ran into conflicts with various individuals and groups in Kirman. Among those individuals were his brother-in-law, Sayyid Áqá Javád Shírází (he was a son-in-law of Ibrahím Khán Zahr al-Dawla and therefore Karím Khán's brother-in-law). These two quarreled over control of the Ibrahimiyya school, with Karím Khán trying to have Shaykhism taught there. When Sayyid Kázim Rashtí died in 1844, Karím Khán proclaimed himself the new leader of the Shaykhí school, and from what I can gather, continued to spread the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kázim and expanded Shaykhí thought in various ways.

In addition to clashes with the religious orthodoxy, and other Shaykhis, Karím Khán also denounced the Báb, and in fact viciously attacked Him and His claims in a number of essays and books (at least eight). His earliest work against the Báb was entitled the *Izhaq al-batil*.<sup>9</sup> Karím

Khán Kirmání spent his last years in privacy on his estate in Langar, outside of Kirman city. Mangol Bayat states that "his ideas remained unrealized, his ambition unfulfilled," and the radical transformation of Shaykhi ideas into a concrete program of action was instead undertaken by someone else — i.e. the Báb.<sup>10</sup>

## The Mi'raj

As a considerable portion of Bahá'u'lláh's comments on Kirmání relate to the *mi'raj*, a brief discussion of this phenomenon in Islamic studies would be useful. The *mi'raj* is associated with Qur'anic verses, in particular the following: "Glory be to Him who transported His servant by night from the Masjid al-Haram to the Masjid al-Aqṣá which We have surrounded with blessing, in order to show him one of our signs."<sup>11</sup> The significance of the *mi'raj* in Islamic history has been noted as follows:

The belief that Muhammad ascended to heaven in the course of his life and beheld the secrets of the otherworld as no other person had ever beheld them is shared by all factions of Islam. In Muslim religious literature, the idea of the Mi'raj, Muhammad's ascension to heaven, is closely associated with that of the Isra', his nocturnal journey. Neither term appears as such in the Qur'an, yet both developed in close connection with crucial, though ambiguous, Quranic passages.<sup>12</sup>

The Qur'anic passage related to the *m'iraj* has received a great deal of atten-

tion on the part of commentators, analysts, poets, artists, and others throughout history. Legends quickly developed in the first two centuries after the establishment of Islam and found their way into a number of different genres of writing. The *mi'ráj* appears in numerous versions, with different explanations and important variations reflecting the historical period in which the story was retold, etc. The story found its way into a number of genres of literature and Islamic writing, including "stories of the prophets" literature (*qīṣas al-anbiyá*), general histories, Muḥammad's biography, and *ḥadīth* literature. There has been lively and robust debate surrounding a number of elements of the story, including whether or not the ascension was a spiritual event or a physical one. We find *mi'ráj* literature in east and west Africa, we find it in Indonesian literature, and we find it in Islamic art, with some magnificent productions of *mi'ráj*namahs, manuscripts of the *mi'ráj* being beautifully illuminated. The story has been interpreted by theologians, by neoplatonic Islamic philosophers, by Sufis, and by poets.<sup>13</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh says that while the *Irshád al-a'vám* was in his possession, He had the opportunity to glance at it a couple of times, and the second time He examined it, He "accidentally came upon the story of the 'Mi'ráj' of Muḥammad." He also states that He noticed that the author had listed

*some twenty or more sciences, the knowledge of which he considered to be essential for the comprehen-*

*sion of the mystery of the 'Mi'ráj'. We gathered from his statements that unless a man be deeply versed in them all, he can never attain to a proper understanding of this transcendent and exalted theme. Among the specified sciences were the science of metaphysical abstractions, of alchemy, and natural magic. Such vain and discarded learnings, this man hath regarded as the pre-requisites of the understanding of the sacred and abiding mysteries of divine Knowledge.*<sup>14</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh expresses concern that "Not one understanding heart or mind, not one among the wise and learned, hath taken notice of these preposterous statements," that is, those made by the author in this work.<sup>15</sup> He asks,

*How can the knowledge of these sciences, which are so contemptible in the eyes of the truly learned, be regarded as essential to the apprehension of the mysteries of the 'Mi'raj,' whilst the Lord of the 'Mi'raj' Himself was never burdened with a single letter of these limited and obscure learnings, and never defiled His radiant heart with any of these fanciful illusions?*<sup>16</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh presents an alternative route to understanding the *mi'ráj*, stating:

*By the righteousness of God! Whoso desireth to fathom the mystery of this 'Mi'raj,' and craveth a drop from this ocean, if the mirror of his heart be already obscured by the dust of these learnings, he must needs cleanse and purify it ere the light of this*



*mystery can be reflected therein.*<sup>17</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh continues to criticize Karím Khán's arrogance and ignorance, and expresses astonishment over the fact that people were actually listening to Karím Khán, and following him.

### The *Irshád al-avám*

Kirmání wrote the *Irshád al-avám* 1267/1850-51, and it was published in Tabriz, Iran in 1271/1854-55, some six years before Bahá'u'lláh composed the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* in 1861. It was also published in Bombay in 1851, approximately ten years before Bahá'u'lláh wrote the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. This book exists in three volumes, and the section in the *Irshád al-avám* about the *mi'raj* appears to be exactly that portion of the book that Bahá'u'lláh read and refers to. I have translated the relevant passage which includes the list of "sciences" Kirmání says are necessary to understand the *mi'raj*. They consist of the following:

- 1) geometry
- 2) astronomy
- 3) Ptolemaic studies
- 4) geography
- 5) mirrors and imaging
- 6) natural sciences
- 7) divine knowledge/divinity
- 8) philosophy of nature
- 9) medicine
- 10) impressions
- 11) talismanic magic
- 12) magic squares
- 13) grammatical studies
- 14) signs/esoteric significances
- 15) rubrics

- 16) addition and subtraction
- 17) approximation and interdistance
- 18) planetary conjunctions and genealogy
- 19) astrology
- 20) embryology (? *rukhá'im*)
- 21) transubstantiation
- 22) reverberations
- 23) pharmaceuticals and planets / solar systems
- 24) mechanics
- 25) resemblances (? *mushákilah*)<sup>18</sup>

Kirmání certainly does see himself as being the only one sufficiently knowledgeable in these sciences to be able to explain the realities of the *mi'raj*, and boasts that he has been able to provide these explanations using a colloquial and common language that villagers would be able to understand, and anticipates receiving criticism about this.

What I find particularly interesting is that it is immediately after Bahá'u'lláh's commentary on Karím Khán Kirmání and his writings that we find the famous "true seeker" section of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. It is also interesting to note that the requirements of the true seeker as expounded in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* number approximately the same as Kirmání's list. For purposes of comparison, Bahá'u'lláh's list is as follows:

- (1) [*The true seeker must*] *cleanse and purify his heart from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.*
- (2) *purge his breast, which is the*



*sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments.*

- (3) *He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.*
- (4) *That seeker must at all times put his trust in God,*
- (5) *must renounce the peoples of the earth,*
- (6) *detach himself from the world of dust,*
- (6) *cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords.*
- (7) *He must never seek to exalt himself above any one,*
- (8) *must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory,*
- (9) *must cling unto patience and resignation,*
- (10) *observe silence and refrain from idle talk.*
- (11) *regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.*

- (12) *He should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire*
- (13) *treasure the companionship of those that have renounced the world,*
- (14) *regard avoidance of boastful and worldly people a precious benefit.*
- (15) *At the dawn of every day he should commune with God,*
- (16) *with all his soul persevere in the quest of his Beloved.*
- (17) *He should consume every wayward thought with the flame of His loving mention,*
- (18) *with the swiftness of lightning, pass by all else save Him.*
- (19) *He should succour the dispossessed,*
- (20) *and never withhold his favour from the destitute.*
- (21) *He should show kindness to animals, how much more unto his fellow-man, to him who is endowed with the power of utterance.*
- (22) *He should not hesitate to offer up his life for his Beloved,*
- (23) *nor allow the censure of the people to turn him away from the Truth.*
- (24) *He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself,*

- (25) *nor promise that which he doth not fulfil.*
- (26) *With all his heart should the seeker avoid fellowship with evil doers, and pray for the remission of their sins.*
- (27) *He should forgive the sinful, and never despise his low estate, for none knoweth what his own end shall be.*
- (28) *he should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness.*<sup>19</sup>

In one sense, Bahá'u'lláh could be juxtaposing Karím Khán's list of 25 "sciences" necessary to understand the mysteries of the *mi'raj* with His own list of approximately the same number of qualities necessary for understanding the divine mysteries. For those readers who were familiar with the *Irshád al-a'vám* and Kirmání's list of 25 sciences, Bahá'u'lláh's list certainly would have provided an extremely powerful contrast between the two.

Karím Khán extends or exaggerates the argument in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* beyond, perhaps, what Bahá'u'lláh intended. Bahá'u'lláh, it seems to me, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, stresses the point that sciences such as those listed by Karím Khán Kirmání are **not** useful in understanding the *mi'raj*, which Bahá'u'lláh understands spiritually, as did Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kázim. It is important to note that Bahá'u'lláh does NOT present a

blanket condemnation of science or learning, for Karím Khán's list contains a number of highly respected sciences, some of which Bahá'u'lláh elsewhere extensively praises.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has shown the benefits of what we can generally call "contextualization" of Bahá'í sacred writings. In many cases, it is not only appropriate, but beneficial and advantageous to be more familiar with the historical background and circumstances relating to the production of a particular text. In this instance, it is not just reading Bahá'u'lláh, but reading what Bahá'u'lláh read, that results in a much greater appreciation of the "Tablet of the true seeker."

## Notes

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1. Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret: Qur'án Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1995), 36.
2. Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, 13-14.
3. Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, 14.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, translated by Shoghi Effendi as *The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), 192.
5. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 184.
6. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 184.

7. Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 86. Information on Kirmání's biography can also be found in "shaykhiyya," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (EI2), by Denis MacEoin.
8. EI2, "shaykhiyya" and Stephen N. Lambden, "Some Aspects of Isrá'iliyyát and the Emergence of the Bábí-Bahá'í Interpretation of the Bible," PhD dissertation, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2000.
9. Will McCants, a graduate student at Princeton University, has written a paper on this work which was presented at the Irfan Colloquium at Louhelen Conference Center in October, 2003. Kirmání composed the *Izháq al-bátil* approximately a year or so after the Báb made His claims to Mullá Ḥusayn, and in it he not only divined the fact that the Báb was making a great claim, but thought fit to reject it and condemn it through a close analysis of the *Qayyum al-asmá*. He also considered the *Bayán* blasphemous, attacked the notion of a "new prophet," and vowed that he would destroy the Báb.
10. Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*, 86.
11. Qur'án, 17: 1.
12. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), "mi'ráj" vol. 9, 552.
13. EI2, "Mi'rádj."
14. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 186.
15. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 186
16. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 187
17. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 187
18. Kirmání, Ḥájj Muḥammad Karím Khán, *Irshád al-a'vám* (Kirman: Chápkhánah-i Sa'ádat, n.d.), 396-397.
19. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, slightly modified and paraphrased, 192-195.
20. One obvious example is the science of medicine (*tibb*), which Bahá'u'lláh praises using a very exalted language *Lawḥ-i-tibb*,  

"Say, the science of healing is the most noble of all sciences." (trans. Stephen N. Lambden, [www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/BAHA'-ALLAH/L-TIBB.htm](http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/BAHA'-ALLAH/L-TIBB.htm))

# Service, Joy and Sacrifice

## An Essay on Commentaries by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

*James B. Thomas*

### Abstract

Throughout the many talks that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave in His epic journey to the west on 1912, He consistently interspersed the subjects of service and sacrifice. These presuppose basic choices that must be made in changing purpose from self interest to sharing. Moreover, such sharing and service must reach beyond an individual’s ‘comfort zone’ to have any significance. This essay deals with barriers to such change and with the unexpected but uplifting rewards that follow. It further emphasizes the fact of our spiritual nature and the challenge we face in recognizing that fact. The subjects of choice, levels of sacrifice, tests, difficulties and ultimate sacrifice are compared with respect to the priority of service to God and man. In the process of shifting a personal paradigm from self-interest to concern for others, one will often experience spiritual transformation. Within this context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides a supreme example of a life of service to God and to humankind. He expounds upon the meaning of suffering and the mystery of sacrifice. We will examine ever-deepening levels of this subject with the purpose of ascertaining why it is so important to human life.

### Barriers to Faith

One of the common barriers to accepting religious faith is the notion that one must experience sacrifice, pain and suffering while traversing a spiritual path. Sometimes the question is asked “why would our Creator allow His chosen Messengers to experience extreme punishment for the sake of bringing His cause to His creatures?” Or “why would a kind, loving, Heavenly Father permit a Holocaust that would wipe out half of the Jewish population?” Some truly concerned individuals ask “what about all the innocent

babes that have starved to death in times of plenty?” Or “why would God allow over thirteen million children to be left bereft of parents due to the AIDS epidemic in a small country like Uganda?” Of course it’s easy to establish the lines of cause and effect in human crises and to point fingers of blame. Yet to a secularist these questions are simply associated with specific patterns within a bigger picture. In other words “that’s just the way life is — ‘survival of the fittest,’ so there is nothing to gain by worrying over it.” Yet there is a lingering question that even an atheist might ask; what kind of plan would allow such anomalies in

human suffering whether natural or spiritual? Finally, why has religious martyrdom taken on such great significance in the life of man?

## Choices

These questions are answered in a most elegant fashion by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and in the process He opens up a reality that has lain dormant for many centuries in the vast majority of the people of the world: the reality of the soul. In one of His tablets He stresses that "man should sacrifice all of his conditions for the divine station of God."<sup>1</sup> He further defines the station of God as "mercy, kindness, forgiveness, sacrifice, favour, grace and giving-life to the spirits and lighting the fire of His love in the hearts and arteries."<sup>2</sup> From this it is inferred that the spiritual sickness of the world of man is inherently anchored to the material side of life. If we disregard our spiritual nature then the worst kind of catastrophe is not only possible but also very probable.

In *Paris Talks* 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the importance of meditation as a means of speaking with the spirit and states: "You cannot apply the name 'man' to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts."<sup>3</sup> Here He is taking us out of the primitive realm of consciousness and is drawing us into the realm of the spirit of faith. In *Star of The West* He describes faith:

*Faith outwardly means to believe in the message a Manifestation brings to the world and accept the*

*fulfillment in him of that which the prophets have announced. But in reality faith embodies three degrees: to confess with the tongue; to believe in the heart; to show forth in our actions. These three things are essential to true faith. The important requirement is the love of God in the heart . . . By our actions we reveal what is growing in the heart. Actions are mirrors of the soul . . . Faith is not so much what we believe as what we carry out . . . Man must prove whatsoever he speaketh by deeds and actions.*<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the very thing that gives us our greatest strength, our rational capacity, which enables one to reflect 'the image of God,' can be our 'Achilles heel'—our most vulnerable feature when we make the wrong choices. The creative, imaginative capacity of modern man can become addicted to purely material pleasures and in that state may fall victim to 'Satanic fancies' with gross results. Our intelligence can magnify emotions and instincts far beyond normal animal behavior. When this is expanded to groups, cultures and governments, the most horrendous acts can be perpetrated on innocent people. Events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century confirmed this on a massive scale over and over again. Man alone causes such acts and to blame God for human transgressions is to utterly disregard the endless efforts by His Prophets to aid humankind in a multitude of ways with guidance, inspiration and, yes, sacrifice. In other words, to question why God would allow suffering of the innocent or of His Messengers is to put

things in reverse order. The question should be: Why do we do things that not only damage our own character but, at the same time, hurt the very ones we love the most? How can we blame God for our own acts when He has gone to such great lengths to help us by sending His Messengers to reveal His laws, all for our benefit? How can we point the finger of blame to others or to God when we support and embrace acts of corrupt leaders?

The real tragedy of modern life is that men and women seem to deny the most important aspect of their being: the existence of a spiritual life. Modern research indicates that the brain has a special zone for processing mystical thoughts.<sup>5</sup> From this we must assume that the evolutionary process of human development must have included spiritual awareness early on. So when Bahá'u'lláh tells us that we are 'created noble'<sup>6</sup> He is including a physical support system that can sustain spiritual development. But there is another aspect of our being that is relegated to the spiritual life which is truly mysterious, and that is the altruistic capacity that humans fulfill in acts for the benefit of others without expectation of reward. Often in situations of crisis, certain individuals will unexpectedly raise themselves to heroic levels of performance in helping their fellow human beings. No greater example of this has occurred in modern times than the catastrophe of September 11, 2001 in "The City of The Covenant" with the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. This event awoke the latent generosity and compassion of the American people as

never before. The examples of heroism within the ranks of firemen, police and civil servants stands unprecedented in times of peace. Something unexpected and uplifting happens to those who experience sacrifice and service for the benefit of others. This is a form of proof that the veracity of human spiritual capacity is very real, even when we may not be fully aware of that capacity.

It is with regard to this spiritual capacity that 'Abdu'l-bahá guides us to a deeper understanding of our own nature. He states:

*It is an axiomatic fact that while you meditate you are speaking with your own spirit. In that state of mind you put certain questions to your spirit and the spirit answers: the light breaks forth and the reality is revealed.<sup>7</sup>*

The recognition of this reality is actually a first step on the path of service to the Creator and to our fellow human beings. In the meditative state we become detached from physical wants so much so that what once seemed difficult to give up becomes unimportant while sacrifice to serve becomes an inner source of happiness free of external influences. In other words, in this manner, if we choose, we can pluck the heart-strings of the soul and a whole new world will open up.

### Levels of Sacrifice

At a meeting at New York during His trip through the United States in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá described four levels of significance related to sacrifice. He also discussed two kinds of sacrifice that

apply to these four levels, one physical and the other spiritual that are interrelated. In this instance He was speaking to Christians.

The first significance of sacrifice that 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounds upon is exemplified by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And He states categorically that Christ willingly sacrificed Himself for our sake. He was depicted as knowing, from the beginning of His ministry, that he would face great tribulations in the course of His teaching. He was aware of the dangers in speaking out in opposition to existing governments and cultures and how they would rise against Him. Knowing full well that eventually His blood would be shed and His body broken, He did not hesitate to proclaim His message.<sup>8</sup>

The degree of pain and suffering associated with crucifixion must not be confused with mere dying even of a violent kind. The Phoenicians reputedly invented this excruciating form of execution long ago as the most effective deterrent to theft. Theirs was a sea-bound empire that could not rely on land-based law in primitive times. Anyone with thoughts of piracy or theft would be profoundly discouraged to commit crime after seeing a hapless victim hanging on a cross in public view. It was not just the pain of supporting ones weight on the nails in hands and feet that one had to endure, it was the difficulty in breathing that made it so intolerable. The punishment would last for hours on end while the prisoner would starve for air. In agony he would lift his weight on his nailed feet just to

be able to relax the ribcage so to breath a gulp of precious air only to sink once again in exhaustion and pain. No ordinary human being would ever willingly submit to such torture. Yet, Christ did so out of His love for mankind. It is the reality of this love that inspires this ultimate form of sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> Thus the first level of sacrifice involved the destruction of the physical self.

The second meaning of sacrifice relates to one of Christ's sayings: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."<sup>10</sup> Confusion exists between literal and spiritual interpretations among various churches regarding this quote. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies this:

*It was not the body of Christ that came from heaven. His body came from the womb of Mary, but the Christly perfections descended from heaven; the reality of Christ came down from heaven. The Spirit of Christ and not the body descended from heaven. Consequently, by saying He was the bread that came from heaven He meant that the perfections which He showed forth were divine perfections, that the blessings within Him were heavenly gifts and bestowals, that His light was the light of Reality.<sup>11</sup>*

He further rectifies this notion about living forever as being essentially spiritual, one that assimilates the divine Perfections that are within Christ. Thus, by recognizing the spiritual significance

of Christ's great sacrifice the believer acquires attributes that open the door to eternal spiritual life. This second level of sacrifice then is related to assimilation of spiritual attributes and the capacity to share them with others.<sup>12</sup>

For the third meaning of sacrifice, 'Abdu'l-Bahá draws upon the imagery of a small seed that has been planted in the ground. As the seed breaks open for the first tiny root to grow followed quickly by its first shoot, it physically sacrifices itself so that the tree may grow into a giant plant. But the potential of that seed will be expressed in the beauty of a fully-grown tree. Without the sacrifice of the seed, the tree could not grow. By comparing Christ to the seed, a powerful metaphor is expressed for the birth of Christianity.

*Christ outwardly disappeared. His personal identity became hidden from the eyes, even as the identity of the seed disappeared; but the bounties, divine qualities and perfections of Christ became manifest in the Christian community which Christ founded through sacrificing Himself.*<sup>13</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá then describes how the potential of the seed is realized through the growth of branches, twigs, blossoms and fruits that define the maturity of the tree just as the teachings of Christ result in the maturity of the Christian community. Without the seed the tree could not have come into existence.<sup>14</sup> The third level of sacrifice thus embodies the transformation of one positive reality into another.

The fourth level of sacrifice is based on a principle that at first sounds mysterious. It is described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a reality that "sacrifices its own characteristics"! It sounds like some form of annihilation yet it becomes the exact opposite in the light of true understanding. When we cling to the world of nature we are inevitably caught up in a maelstrom of self-destructive influences. In spite of what might appear on the surface to be good in the phenomenal world, there exist disparaging conditions of corruption, death, ambition, avarice, self worship, egotism, bloodthirstiness, animalism, ferocity, darkness and evil passion. These are characteristics that must be sacrificed in order to replace them with divine attributes.<sup>15</sup> He explains how this may be done:

*On the other hand, man must acquire heavenly qualities and attain divine attributes. He must become the image and likeness of God. He must seek the bounty of the eternal, become the manifestor of the love of God, the light of guidance, the tree of life and the depository of the bounties of God. That is to say, man must sacrifice the qualities and attributes of the world of nature for the qualities and attributes of the world of God.*<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes an ingot of iron in its raw state as symbolizing the attributes of the human world with its qualities of solidity, coldness and blackness. These features are concealed and disappear when the iron is cast into a forge. It then takes on the



qualities of the fire that become visibly apparent with its color, its fluidity and heat. The iron becomes something different when it takes on these new qualities that may be said to symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom. So it happens when man becomes detached from human imperfections, from earthly bonds and from the darkness of the animal world, he enters a "realm of the unbounded" and partakes of the unseen world with divine virtues. He becomes something different, he becomes a "sacrificial lover of the Sun of Truth."<sup>17</sup>

What appears to be our strength in the world of nature is actually imperfection with respect to the spiritual life. Human beings are the only earthly creatures capable of sacrificing these tendencies for the sake of acquiring heavenly qualities. This is no doubt part of our evolutionary growth toward achieving an ever-higher state of existence but this can only be achieved through divine assistance. It is there for us to reject or accept and we must accept this assistance if the destiny of man is to be fulfilled. 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts this issue of sacrifice in perfect perspective:

*Every man trained through the teachings of God and illumined by the light of His guidance, who becomes a believer in God and His signs and is enkindled with the fire of the love of God, sacrifices the imperfections of nature for the sake of divine perfections. Consequently, every perfect person, every illumined, heavenly individual stands in the station of sacrifice.*<sup>18</sup>

Thence, the fourth level of sacrifice involves detaching one's self from negative material values in favor of positive spiritual attributes and thereby becoming a new being.

### Beyond Tests and Difficulties

No one wants to hear about pain and suffering because every creature experiences them in varying degrees. Whether it is for altruistic reasons or for mere survival, suffering is an ever-present fact of material life. But when pain or suffering is endured for a higher cause it takes on a special significance especially in matters of the spirit.

The mystery of sacrifice is a profound one, requiring detailed explanation. But briefly it may be stated that sacrificial love is the love shown by the moth towards the candle, by the parched wayfarer towards the living fountain, by the true lover towards his beloved, by the yearning heart towards the goal of its desire.<sup>19</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains further that grief and sorrow are part of a divine plan. Without them we can not grow. He compares this to a farmer who ploughs a field for planting which ultimately manifests a rich harvest. Like the earth turned over by a plough we are transformed when we are chastened and thereby reveal a harvest of spiritual virtue in our own lives. He says, "It is clear, then, that tests and trials are, for sanctified souls, but God's bounty and grace, while to the weak, they are a calamity, unexpected and sudden."<sup>20</sup>

No one suffered more than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did throughout His long life, both physically and mentally. Concurrently, enormous responsibility rested upon His shoulders in dealing with matters of the Cause of God. Threats on His life by covenant breakers were His constant companion. The early years in Akka brought severe distress to the companions of Bahá’u’lláh while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá bore the brunt of it. Through it all He laid out the Divine Plan for spreading the Faith around the world, wrote many tablets and revealed prayers of great potency. And most amazing, while under constant demoralizing pressure, He expressed radiant happiness to all who had the good fortune to meet Him.

*This is the day of Bahá’u’lláh, the age of the Blessed Perfection, the cycle of the Greatest Name. If you do not smile now, for what time will you await and what greater happiness could you expect?*<sup>21</sup>

He clarified His own dilemma:

*Grieve not because of my imprisonment and calamity; for this prison is my beautiful garden, my mansioned paradise, and my throne of dominion among mankind. My calamity in my prison is a crown to me in which I glory among the righteous.*<sup>22</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá once spoke about His imprisonment when addressing friends from the west:

*We are glad, oh! so full of gladness that you are free, freedom is not a matter of place, but of condition. It was happy in that prison, for those days were passed*

*in the path of service. To me prison was freedom. Troubles are a rest to me. Death is life. To be despised is honor. Therefore was I full of happiness all through that prison time. When one is released from the prison of self, that is indeed freedom! for self is the greatest prison. When this release takes place, one can never be imprisoned. Unless one accepts dire vicissitudes, not with dull resignation, but with radiant acquiescence, one cannot attain this freedom.*<sup>23</sup>

## Ultimate Sacrifice

It is inspiring that Divine messengers of God sacrifice Their very being for the love of man. Every effort, every word, every breath of Their existence is spent on behalf of humankind. Some, like Christ and the Báb, give Their lives quickly after a short but profound ministry. Others, like Moses and Bahá’u’lláh, extended this sacrificial process over a forty-year period. In every case, They gave Their all while enduring extreme tests and while revealing teachings that utterly changed the world.

It is also inspiring that men and women of faith in return gave their lives for the love of their Prophets. In each Dispensation large numbers of innocent souls have been martyred for their faith.

*Of the apostles the most important martyrs were SS. Peter and Paul, both put to death at Rome. Clement of Rome describes them as God’s athletes, contending for the heavenly prize, and mentions a “great multitude” executed at the*

*same time. Early in the 2nd century, Ignatius of Antioch described his own prospective martyrdom as a way of "attaining to God" and urged the Roman Christians not to make any effort to have him spared.*<sup>24</sup>

The early centuries of the Christian era were particularly gruesome. In 64 A.D., Nero, the Roman emperor who had murdered his own mother in year 59, "sought to recover his popularity with the mob by illuminating his gardens with a public display of burning Christians; on the pretense that those incomprehensible and therefore formidable Jewish fanatics had set fire to Rome."<sup>25</sup> Sacrificial festivals presented by some Roman Emperors in the Coliseum for the amusement of the populace involved voracious ingestion of live Christians by hungry lions. Reputedly, the guards would slash the skin covering the abdomens of hapless victims so that bleeding would increase the ferocity of the beasts.

The greatest religious martyrdom in history occurred during the early years of the Bahá'í Era in which some twenty thousand of the faithful refused to recant their faith. The cruelty and violence were almost indescribable. Not only did this occur in public view, the authorities ingeniously involved the people themselves in perpetrating endless atrocities against innocent followers of the Báb and later of Bahá'u'lláh. One of the outstanding heroes of the many uprisings against the Bábís was Váhid during the upheaval of Nayríz. After resisting a long siege against impossible

odds He and his companions were captured and arrested under sentence of death. Nabíl describes these events in *The Dawn Breakers*:

In their eagerness to carry out the suggestion of 'Abbás-Qulí Khán, these men snatched the turban from the head of Váhid, wound it around his neck, and, binding him to a horse, dragged him ignominiously through the streets. . . . The women of Nayríz, stirred to the highest pitch of excitement by the shouts of triumph which a murderous enemy was raising, pressed from every side around the corpse, and, to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals gave free vent to their feelings of unrestrained fanaticism: They danced merrily around it, scornful of the words which Váhid, in the midst of his agony, had spoken, words which the Imám Ḥusayn, in a former age and in similar circumstances, had uttered: "Thou knowest, O my Beloved, that I have abandoned the world for Thy sake, and have placed my trust in Thee alone. I am impatient to hasten to Thee, for the beauty of Thy countenance has been unveiled to my eyes. Thou dost witness the evil designs which my wicked persecutor has cherished against me. Nay, never will I submit to his wishes or pledge my allegiance to him."<sup>26</sup>

This quote explains as well as any can why early believers in a new faith of God express by their complete submission such profound love for the Divine Messenger Who brings the new Revelation. Nabíl continues:

Thus was brought to an end a

noble and heroic life. . . . The extinction of that life was the signal for a fierce onslaught on the lives and property of those who had identified themselves with his Faith. No less than five thousand men were commissioned for that villainous task. The men were seized, chained, ill-treated, and eventually slaughtered. The women and children were captured and subjected to brutalities which no pen dare describe. Their property was confiscated, and their houses were destroyed. The fort of Khájih was burned to the ground. The majority of the men were first conducted in chains to Shiraz, and there, for the most part, suffered a cruel death. Those whom Zaynu'l-'Ábidín Khan, for purposes of personal benefit, had plunged into dark and subterranean dungeons were, as soon as his object had been achieved, delivered into the hands of his myrmidons, who perpetrated upon them acts of unspeakable cruelty. They were paraded at first through the streets of Nayríz, after which they were subjected to atrocious treatment in the hope of extracting from them whatever material advantage their persecutors had hitherto been unable to obtain. These having satisfied their greed, each victim was made to suffer an agonizing death. Every instrument of torture their executioners could devise was utilized to quench their thirst for revenge. They were branded, their nails were pulled out, their bodies were lashed, an incision was made in the nose through which a string was driven, nails were hammered into

their hands and feet, and in that piteous state each of them was dragged through the streets, an object of contempt and derision to all the people.<sup>27</sup>

During the upheaval in Zanján, a formidable champion of the Cause of the Báb and one of the “ablest ecclesiastical dignitaries of his age,”<sup>28</sup> Ḥujjat-i-Zanjání, led the defenders of Fort Tabarsí. His companions resisted a long siege with incredible courage under his leadership. When they were at last overwhelmed, Ḥujjat succumbed to a bullet wound and was secretly buried because his companions did not want his remains to be mutilated. Ultimately they each suffered a cruel and barbaric death:

A number of these captives were blown from guns; others were stripped naked, ice-cold water was poured upon their bodies, and they were lashed severely. Still others were smeared with treacle and left to perish in the snow. Despite the shame and cruelties they were made to suffer, not one of these captives was known either to recant or to utter one angry word against his persecutors. Not even a whisper of discontent escaped their lips, nor did their countenances betray a shadow of regret or grief. No amount of adversity could succeed in darkening the light that shone in those faces; no words, however insulting, could disturb the serenity of their expressions.<sup>29</sup>

The extreme acts of sacrifice by so many champions of the heroic age of the Bahá'í Dispensation make our own efforts seem pale by comparison. But

that should not deter anyone from service; contrarily the spirit of faith that those heroes expressed should inspire us all. Fortunately for this age, as Bahá'u'lláh explained in a tablet, "martyrdom is not confined to the shedding of blood." He advised the believers not to volunteer to give their lives. He "further ordained that teaching the Cause is as meritorious as dying for the Cause."<sup>30</sup> In other words, to die for the Cause when one is under coercion to recant one's faith may result in the highest honor. But to commit suicide in the hope of gaining such honor, especially at the cost of others, is utter waste and without reward.

Everyone can serve within his or her own capacity and to do so in the act of teaching is the most meritorious act they can perform in this life. One has only to talk to a pioneer of the Faith who has served far from home to get a glimpse of the joy and happiness that comes from this type of service, although it is far better to experience this for one's self. Yet a new believer may start out to teach with great enthusiasm only to become discouraged for lack of knowledge or experience. There were two things that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to say about this when speaking to an early believer, Florence Khanum:

One was that He said to her . . . be patient, be as I am. The other was when some one expressed discouragement to Him, saying they could not possibly acquire all the qualities and virtues that Bahá'ís are directed to possess, and the Master replied . . . little by little;

day-by-day.<sup>31</sup>

The greatest example that we can follow is 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá), the 'Master,' the 'Mystery of God,' the 'Most Great Branch,' 'The Exemplar,' 'Knight of the British Realm' and 'The Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant'. I often think of Him as the Great Sustainer of the Faith but all the accolades meant nothing to Him. He only wanted to be known as a servant to the Cause revealed by Bahá'u'lláh:

*'Abdu'l-Bahá is himself a servant at the Threshold of the Blessed Beauty and a manifestation of pure and utter servitude at the Threshold of the Almighty. He hath no other station or title, no other rank or power. This is my ultimate Purpose, my eternal Paradise, my holiest Temple and my Sadratu'l-Muntahá. . . .*<sup>32</sup>

Sadratu'l-Muntahá refers to "The tree beyond which there is no passing." In the Bahá'í writings it is also a symbol of the Manifestation of God, specifically Bahá'u'lláh and is sometimes called the Divine or Sacred Lote Tree.<sup>33</sup> In clarifying His own station in response to the notion that He might be a Divine Manifestation in His own right, He unequivocally states in the light of service:

*My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion. . . . No name, no title, no mention, no*

*commendation have I, nor will ever have, except 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory."*<sup>34</sup>

In another place He further enlightens us about the real reasons for the difficulties that humans experience:

*Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting. While a man is happy he may forget his God; but when grief comes and sorrows overwhelm him, then will he remember his Father who is in Heaven, and who is able to deliver him from his humiliations. Men who suffer not, attain no perfection. The plant most pruned by the gardeners is that one which, when the summer comes, will have the most beautiful blossoms and the most abundant fruit. The laborer cuts up the earth with his plough, and from that earth comes the rich and plentiful harvest. The more a man is chastened, the greater is the harvest of spiritual virtues shown forth by him."*<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the transformational process, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has this to say:

*These tests do but cleanse the spotting of self from off the mirror of the heart, till the Sun of Truth can cast its rays thereon; for there is no veil more obstructive than the self, and however tenuous that veil may be, at the last it will completely shut a person out, and deprive him of his portion of eternal grace."*<sup>36</sup>

We began this presentation by intro-

ducing four vital issues regarding human life. (1) It is a matter of choice for a person to remain totally self serving or altruistic. (2) Serving a cause must be significant to have real meaning. (3) Recognition of one's spiritual nature is most effective in overcoming the natural resistance to serving selflessly. (4) 'Abdu'l-Bahá is exalted as a prime example, both by action and by wisdom of what the mystery of service, sacrifice and joy is all about.

We first addressed the barriers to faith that emerge when the idea of service is raised and how they increase with the requirement that sacrifice is essential to service. Also noted was the mystery of why God would allow the great suffering of Divine Messengers and how it might provoke another barrier. More barriers arise with the knowledge of the tragedies of human history that seem to overwhelm all the promises made by various revelations of the past. But the fate of barriers comes down to the choices made by man in every age. Our greatest strength of the rational mind becomes hampered by the limitations of natural existence in a material world. Thus our greatest challenge is to change this to a new paradigm for life on a higher level of the spirit.

'Abdu'l-Bahá provides keys to that change through His numerous writings. First, He opens up a new reality that is spiritual, not just metaphysical but based on a profound Faith in a loving, providing Creator. All of the teachings that He received from His father Bahá'u'lláh over a forty-year period are expressed in warm human terms that touch the heart

of everyone that maintains an open mind. In this manner He takes us out of our primitive consciousness into the realm of the spirit. And it is the Spirit of Faith that sustains us on our future path in this world and the next. The Spirit of Faith is further reinforced by the obligation of prayer and the faculty of meditation. This, of course is true for all great religions. For, in spite of the difficulties of their times, many believers of the past have enhanced the progress of civilization in the age in which they lived. Now a new age is upon us and a deeper understanding of our spiritual destiny is urgent in light of the worldwide threats that we face.

Foremost among these threats is materialism and all of the secular limitations that go with it. One way to overcome this challenge is through service in a spirit of faith for it may open the door to spiritual transformation. But service involves sacrifice and, of the different levels of sacrifice described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is one that every human being on earth can share. It has to do with the giving up of physical pre-occupations and the gaining of divine attributes. Through this process a sense of joy begins to replace the sense of loss regarding selfish desires. This is true because we are spiritual beings and until we recognize this that special sense of joy will elude us. The next step is to apply divine attributes in a path of service and this will bring an even deeper sense of happiness.

Mention was made of four levels of sacrifice identified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

using Christ as the example. (1) Through His love for mankind He willingly sacrificed His physical self for our spiritual benefit. (2) By assimilating His spiritual attributes, the believer can attain eternal life at the highest level and then learn to sacrifice material resources in order to teach the great message related to His ultimate sacrifice. (3) Sacrifice embodies transformation of one reality for another such as a seed giving up its configuration for the growth of a plant or as Christ giving up His personal identity in order for His attributes to emerge in the growth of Christian Civilization. (4) One reality can sacrifice its own characteristics. That is, negative attributes such as corruption, bloodthirstiness, and evil passion must be replaced by divine attributes such as love, trustworthiness, reverence and kindness.

'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that pain and suffering are with us in everyday life and that these may be utilized for our own growth. He states that this is in fact part of a divine plan that can result in a rich harvest of spiritual bounty. As to the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom it is apparent that it is the cause of spectacular growth in the early stages of a new Revelation. This is exemplified in the first three centuries of the Christian era and on an even greater scale in the heroic age of the Bahá'í Faith. In our time however, selfless teaching is considered to be the equivalent to martyrdom.

## Conclusion

The loving nature of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that

comes through in His writings shall remain as a core example for all the servants of the Cause of God. He quickly shows us how to overcome the many barriers to faith by connecting us to the different levels of sacrifice that open the door to spiritual transformation. He carries us beyond tests and difficulties in a way that makes them seem increasingly unimportant. He points out that life's pain and suffering can indeed become stepping-stones to spiritual growth. "Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him."<sup>37</sup> He expresses one more thought worth keeping in mind:

*Until a being setteth his foot in the plane of sacrifice, he is bereft of every favour and grace; and this plane of sacrifice is the realm of dying to the self, that the radiance of the living God may then shine forth.*<sup>38</sup>

Finally, it is indeed important for us to understand the real nature of sacrifice and why it seems to be so necessary in life, especially in its spiritual aspects. When this is fully grasped in light of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's insight we are left with two basic choices regarding the progress of the soul. They are simple but their rewards have endless consequences: (1) Do we choose to serve the cause of God and our fellow man with joy and purpose or (2) do we deny our spiritual reality with its responsibilities only to wander in an endless labyrinth of uncertainty? The choice is ours alone to make.

## Epilogue

The early heroes of the Bahá'í Dispensation were not privy to the rich literature that is available to us in our time. Many were simple country folk who became spiritual giants. A few outstanding scholars of religion were intoxicated with the Faith and verbally conveyed its message to anyone who would listen. Miraculously the spirit expressed by the charismatic Báb, even while in prison, enthralled masses of seekers throughout Persia. After His tragic execution, the prophecy that He had earlier revealed regarding "He Whom God shall make manifest" in the year nine,<sup>39</sup> was fulfilled by Bahá'u'lláh the Supreme Manifestation of God. An echo of those enormous sacrifices was heard during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Iran, the Cradle of the Faith, with the barbarous torture and execution of over two hundred innocent Bahá'í leaders.

Startling references are made to the heroic martyrs of the Faith in the Book of Revelation 6:9-6:11, 7:13-7:17 by St. John when he was describing his vision of the "end time." Confirmation of this may be found in *Selections from The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, page 15, paragraph 3.2. The term Lamb, the one sacrificed, applies to all the Manifestations of God in the times of their respective Dispensations. Thus, in the new cycle, "the Lamb," the one who would unseal the books as expressed by St. John is Bahá'u'lláh.



## Notes

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, Vol. I, 65.
2. Ibid.
3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 175.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Star of The West*, March 1917-June 1919, Vol VIII, 58.
5. Larsen and Witham, “Scientists and Religion in America,” *Scientific American*, September 1999, 92.
6. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*, Arabic 22.
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 174.
8. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 450.
9. Ibid.
10. St. John 6:51, Holy Bible, 1325-1326.
11. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 450.
12. Ibid., 450-451.
13. Ibid., 451.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 451-452.
17. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of the Master*, 35.
18. Ibid., 452.
19. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of the Master*, 44.
20. Ibid., 43.
21. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 210.
22. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of The Master*, 41.
23. Ibid., 42.
24. *Encyclopedia Britannica 2001*, Standard Edition CD, Martyr, Christianity.
25. Hammerton and Barnes, *The Illustrated World History*, 274.
26. Nabil-i-A‘zam, *The Dawn Breakers*, 494-495.

27. Ibid., 495-496.
28. Ibid., 529.
29. Ibid., 577.
30. Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá’í Dictionary*, 147.
31. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of The Master*, 76.
32. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 295.
33. Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá’í Dictionary*, 200.
34. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, 139.
35. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 50-51.
36. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 182.
37. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 178.
38. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 76.
39. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 29.

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# The Manifestations of God and Their Function in Human History

*Iscander Micael Tinto*

## Introduction

**T**he Bahá'í Writings explain that the motive force in the development of mankind is the coming of the Manifestation or Prophet of God. Very few people would disagree that human history has been influenced by the Founders of the world's great religions. The powerful impact on civilization of Christ, Moses, the Buddha, or Muḥammad can be seen both in the collective development of humanity and in the life of every individual. From an historical point of view, the Manifestations of God are a few well-known personages Whose existence may be questioned but Whose traces are so evident that no man can fail to acknowledge them.

The greatness of the Manifestations of God has been described as follows:

*The Manifestation of God is the Archetype, and His life is the supreme pattern. His vision not arrested by time and space, encompasses the future as well as the past. He is the only and necessary link between one cycle of social evolution and another. Furthermore, the Manifestation of God releases deep reservoirs of spiritual powers and quickens the forces latent in man. By Him and*

*Him alone, can man attain 'second birth'. Through Him and Him alone, can man know God.<sup>1</sup>*

This powerful statement explains very well who is the Manifestation of God, and introduces a very important concept: that the knowledge of God can only be achieved through the Manifestation of God. Bahá'u'lláh affirms:

*The source of all learning is the Manifestation of God, exalted be His Glory, and this cannot be attained save through knowledge of His divine Manifestation.<sup>2</sup>*

And in another similar passage He says:

*The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been and will continue to be, closed in the face of man. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto his holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness He hath manifested unto man the Day-Stars of His Divine Guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own self.<sup>3</sup>*

It is in the lives of these Luminous Beings that the deeper meanings of God's attributes can be most perfectly under-

stood. Of course, only those who live during the time of a Manifestation of God have the opportunity of observing Him directly. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the essential connection between the individual and God is maintained through the Writings and words of each Manifestation. Bahá'is believe that the Writings of the Messengers of God are the Word of God and it is towards these Writings that man should turn to grow closer to God and acquire a deeper knowledge of Him. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Say: the first and foremost testimony establishing His Truth is His Own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He hath established the words He hath revealed as proofs of His reality and truth . . . He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God.*<sup>4</sup>

We may begin our investigation by studying the common historical aspects of the Manifestations of God. Each Manifestation of God comes from a different background: they include princes and noblemen like the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh, priests like Zoroaster, merchants such as Muḥammad and the Báb, craftsmen like Jesus, and courtiers like Moses. Each also brings a message to humanity, a message that is God given, and which deals with the spiritual aspects of the life of humanity.

In the beginning very few people follow the Manifestations of God, creating great scandals within the population,

very often leading to some form of persecution, which sometimes ushers in the violent death of some of the Manifestations, and the murder of several thousands of Their followers. However, despite these events, the Manifestations of God eventually demonstrate their power of renewal: they transform society and usher in a new civilization. The teachings of these Personages, unlike the guidance of philosophers, conquer humanity through the power they inherently possess, and through the practice of their teachings flourishing civilizations are created: every civilization we know was born through such a process.

In one of His Writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that "two calls to success and prosperity are being raised . . . the one is the call of civilization, of the progress of the material world."<sup>5</sup> This call belongs to the phenomenal world, and helps mankind achieve physical accomplishments. It comprises all the laws and regulations, principles and lofty ideals which are the result of "sound minds," and the efforts of the wise individuals in the course of time. "The propagator and executive power of this call is just government."<sup>6</sup> Next, there is "the soul-stirring call of God, Whose spiritual teachings are safeguards of everlasting glory . . . and cause the attributes of mercy to be revealed in the human world and the life beyond. This second call is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of God."<sup>7</sup> After a certain period of time, these teachings lose their effectiveness amongst men, and according to the law

of evolution, since they offered their contribution, they decline and die.

It is after such events that a new Manifestation appears, bringing new laws, announcing a new message so that humanity can grow towards spirituality through a further stage. As we have seen previously, “the circle of existence returns” and the purpose “in them is the evolution of spiritual men.”<sup>8</sup>

The Manifestations of God differentiate Themselves from the great heroes of history for two reasons:

1. Their teachings, set forth mostly by words and deeds, constitute the magna charta for the spiritual development of humanity. “Without the teachings of God the world of humanity is like the animal kingdom . . .” These teachings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adds, “are the bestowals specialized for man . . .” and are “the basis of all progress in the history of humanity.”<sup>9</sup>
2. The spiritual energy they give to any person who voluntarily decides to get in touch with this force is the cause of his transformation.

### Proofs and Purposes of Their Mission

How can mankind recognize these Luminous Beings, these Perfect Mirrors? As we have previously seen there are three steps: the first step establishing this truth is “His Own Self,” the second step “is His Revelation,” and the third is “the words He hath revealed as proofs of His reality and truth.”<sup>10</sup> As Bahá’u’lláh explains:

*He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of man can never be known except through His Manifestation, and His Manifestation can adduce no greater proof of the truth of His Mission than the proof of His Own Person.*<sup>11</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá addresses this very important issue in this way:

*One of the proofs is through the fulfillment of former prophecies, the second proof are the creative words and phrases which salute the hearts of humanity, the third are their deeds and fourth are their teachings.*<sup>12</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not regard prophecies and miracles as very important, as they are very hard to understand and can be refuted very easily; also, they are “convincing to a limited number only.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives importance to deeds of the Manifestations of God, to Their teachings, and to the influence Their words have on the human heart. He thus writes: “The Divine Educator must teach by words and also by deed, thus revealing to all the straight path of truth.” Among Their deeds He emphasizes Their “strength and endurance”<sup>14</sup> under tests and difficulties. About the influence of the Words of the Manifestation of God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

*The proof of the validity of a Manifestation of God is the penetration and potency of His Word, the cultivation of heavenly attributes in the lives and hearts of His Followers and the bestowals of*

*divine education upon the world of humanity. This is absolute proof. The world is a school where there must be Teachers of the Word of God.*<sup>15</sup>

In one of His Writings we read:

*If we wish to discover whether anyone of these Souls or Messengers was in reality a Prophet of God, we must investigate the facts surrounding His life and history, and the first point of our investigation will be the education He bestowed upon mankind.*<sup>16</sup>

Moreover He writes:

*It is evident, then, that the proofs of the validity and inspiration of a Prophet of God are the deeds of beneficent accomplishment and greatness emanating from Him. If He proves to be instrumental in the elevation and betterment of mankind, He is undoubtedly a valid and heavenly Messenger.*<sup>17</sup>

Elaborating on the requirements of the Manifestations of God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “The essential requirement and qualification of Prophethood is the training and the guidance of the people.”<sup>18</sup> The transformation produced by the influence exercised by the Manifestation of God upon His followers is so great that some of them offer up their lives for the Faith they have embraced. History will show if the claims of these Prophets are right or just words of an impostor.

At the request of one of His disciples, Christ explained how to distinguish true prophets from the false ones: “Ye shall

know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”<sup>19</sup> Since we can recognize the Manifestations of God by ‘Their fruits,’ we should try to understand what these fruits are.

When They appear, the Manifestations of God have a twofold purpose: to foster the spiritual development of every human being, and to promote the progress of society. Bahá’u’lláh explains:

*God’s purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind and provide all the means by which they can be established.*<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Bahá’u’lláh states in one of His Writings:

*And yet, is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall effect 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.*<sup>21</sup>

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Prophets of God have been sent with

*the purpose of quickening the soul of men into higher and divine recognitions . . . to train the souls of humanity and free them from the thrall of natural instincts*

*and physical tendencies*<sup>22</sup>  
and to

*teach and enlighten man, to explain to him the mystery of the power of the Holy Spirit; to enable him to reflect the light, and so, in his turn, to be the source of guidance to others.*<sup>23</sup>

The forces released by the Manifestations of God are those instruments capable of transforming the heart of man, namely those negative qualities which through the power of the Word of God are capable of such a transformation. The first purpose fulfills the second: “to carry forward an ever advancing civilization,”<sup>24</sup> or as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would say, “unifying humanity and establishing universal peace”. In this sense we can say that “the Prophets have founded divine civilizations.”<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the Manifestations of God are the Educators of mankind, which is in need of Them because “the world of existence is but a jungle of disorder and confusion, a state of nature producing nothing but fruitless and useless trees.”<sup>26</sup> The Manifestations of God are thus like the sun: its warmth helps the seed planted in the soil of the human heart to grow and develop and yield its fruits.

The Words of Bahá’u’lláh pay befitting homage to such an important Being, Whose recognition is vital for every individual:

*It is God’s supreme testimony, the clearest evidence of His Truth, the Signs of His consummate wisdom, the tokens of His mercy, the*

*proofs of His most loving providence, the symbol of His most perfect grace.*<sup>27</sup>

### Sufferings and Denial

“In the beginning of every revelation adversities have prevailed, which later on have been turned into great prosperity.”<sup>28</sup> As we have seen, the appearance of the Manifestation of God upsets the equilibrium of the society in which He lives; later, His teachings gradually envelop the whole of humanity breaking all the time-honoured traditions, which mostly have turned into prejudices. In the Bible we read:

*He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandments of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.*<sup>29</sup>

Through the help of the Manifestations of God the soul of man can make a conscious effort to draw closer to God and return to Him. This is an educational process in which man is transformed. Thus if these Personages were attractive and evident to human eyes — that is, to that same nature that must be overcome — how could this be a free choice?

It is for this reason that all the Manifestations have to pass through



severe trials: to enable every human being to purify their soul. Christ accepted to die on the cross for the well-being of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb exclaim likewise that Their sufferings are the source for the improvement of man's character. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Consider the former generations: Witness how every time the Day-Star of Divine Bounty hath shed the light of His Revelation upon the world, the people of His Day have arisen against Him and repudiated His Truth . . .*<sup>30</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this essay to deal with this issue at any greater length. This topic in fact deserves a more careful study and investigation on the part of every seeker.

### Their Threefold Reality

In the Bahá'í Writings we read that the Manifestations of God convey to mankind "the Revelation of the Soul of God". That is, the first Emanation of the Divine Reality is reflected in the human reality of these Beings like the sun is reflected in a perfect mirror. The Manifestations of God are thus characterized by a threefold reality:

1. **Material:** Their bodies which, as for every human being, are subject to birth, to growth, to death, to sleep, and to the need of food and water.
2. **Human:** This refers to Their soul, Their individuality. In this connection Bahá'u'lláh says that "Everyone of Them is a Mirror of God."<sup>31</sup> He writes moreover that the soul of the

Manifestation of God is a "perfect soul," "like a mirror wherein the Sun of Reality is reflected . . . the perfect expression of the Sun."<sup>32</sup>

When we compare the souls of the Manifestations of God to those of other human beings, we see that Their souls occupy a different position. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*The individual reality of the Manifestations of God is a holy reality, and for that reason it is sanctified and, in that which concerns its nature and quality, is distinguished from all other things...*<sup>33</sup>

The difference between the souls of the Manifestations and ordinary human souls it is like that existing between the sun and the moon: one is the source of the rays, the other reflects them.

Each Manifestation of God also possesses a "rational soul" or "human spirit" says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and "share[s] it with all mankind." He explains that Their degree of perception is far different from man's and transcends human knowledge, in the sense that is "a conscious power, not a power of investigation and of research."<sup>34</sup> In the station of Their individualities, They are thus "so many different mirrors, because They have a special individuality, but that which is reflected in the mirrors is one sun."<sup>35</sup> It is comprehensible how these Luminous Beings, though differing from Each Other in many respects, yet are essentially one and the same.

3. **Divine:** This is the Word of God;

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that this reality has neither a beginning nor an end; it is eternal, yet it is inferior to God, because it was created by Him. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares these three aspects — material, human, divine — with a niche, a lamp within the niche, and the light which emanates from the lamp, respectively. Bahá’u’lláh writes that each Manifestation of God occupies a “double station,” divine and human and has a “twofold nature,” “the physical . . . and the spiritual.”<sup>36</sup> The Manifestations of God have access to the Will of God and therefore they are “the vehicle for the transmission of the Grace of the Divinity Itself.”

### The Essence of God and The Manifestations

We have seen in the previous chapters that the Essence of God is unknowable and unreachable, as He “is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute” and “no tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures.”<sup>37</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that

*the Divine Essence surrounds all things. Verily, that which surrounds is greater than the surrounded, and the surrounded cannot contain that which is surrounded, nor comprehend its reality.*<sup>38</sup>

Bahá’u’lláh unequivocally states:

*Every attempt which from the beginning that has no beginning, hath been made to visualize and know God is limited by the exi-*

*gencies of His Own creation.*<sup>39</sup>

And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that:

*. . . differentiation of stages in the contingent world is an obstacle to understanding . . . Every superior stage comprehendeth that which is inferior and discovereth the reality thereof, but the inferior one is unaware of that which is superior and cannot comprehend it. Thus man cannot grasp the Essence of Divinity.*<sup>40</sup>

The active attributes of the Essence of God shine in the world of the kingdom and become manifest in the human world through the Manifestations of God. Therefore, the Manifestations of God are not incarnations of God, nor do They manifest His Essence. Bahá’u’lláh states:

*Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men. He is, and hath been, immensely exalted beyond all that can either be recounted or perceived . . . He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of man can never be known except through His Manifestation, and His Manifestation can adduce no greater proof of the truth of His Mission than the proof of His Own Person.*<sup>41</sup>

The Manifestations of God are thus an emanation of God; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that They

*. . . are as mirrors which have acquired illumination from the Sun of Truth, but the Sun does not descend from its high zenith and does not effect entrance within the mirror. In truth, this mirror*

*has attained complete polish and purity until the utmost capacity of reflection has been developed in it; therefore, the Sun of Reality with its fullest effulgence and splendour is revealed therein.*<sup>42</sup>

The Manifestation of God is the visible expression of that same creative spirit which is the cause of existence and which guides the whole universe, and which manifests itself in a Being Who has the material, human and divine qualities expressed in their perfection, so that mankind can freely recognize Him and by virtue of the immense reservoir of energy released by the Manifestation attain to that transformation which is the core and purpose and purpose of human life.

Elaborating on the theme of His relationship to God, Bahá'u'lláh states:

*When I contemplate, O My God, the relationship that bindeth Me to Thee, I am moved to proclaim to all created things: 'Verily I am God'; and when I consider My Own Self, lo, I find it coarser than clay.*<sup>43</sup>

In the same way, Christ states: "And he said unto him, why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."<sup>44</sup>

Though the Manifestations of God are powerful and pour upon mankind a great amount of energy, yet they are completely submitted to the Will of God and have no will of their own. Bahá'u'lláh refers of Himself as "but a leaf which the winds of the Will of Thy Lord . . . have

stirred."<sup>45</sup> In another passage He explains very clearly this relationship:

*This 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.*<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Jesus states: "... Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing . . ."<sup>47</sup>

The lives of the Manifestations of God offer clear examples of the complete submission unto the Will of God. They are also an example of how in our individual lives we should accept the Will of God as it comes and not in the way we would like It to be.

## The Relationship between the Manifestations of God

In the Bahá'í Writings, the Manifestations of God are seen in Their mutual relations in two different perspectives: the station of unity and the station of distinction.

In the Station of Unity — that is, the station "of pure abstraction and essential unity"<sup>48</sup> — all of the Manifestations of God "have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret".<sup>49</sup> During the time of Their Dispensation, moreover, each One of Them is the depositary of the "Most Great Infallibility."<sup>50</sup> Bahá'u'lláh thus explains this important concept:

*Know that the term 'Infallibility' hath numerous meanings and divers stations. In one sense it is applicable to One Whom God hath made immune from error. Similarly it is applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like. However, the Most Great Infallibility is confined to One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions. Indeed He is a Light which is not followed by darkness and a Truth not overtaken by error. Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt there be about it; and unto none is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore.<sup>51</sup>*

In even more powerful language Bahá'u'lláh states that "Whoso maketh the slightest possible difference between their persons, their words, their messages, their acts and names, hath indeed disbelieved in God."<sup>52</sup>

Referring to the Station of Distinction of the Manifestations of God, on the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh writes that "[e]ach and everyone of them hath been the Bearer of a distinct Message," of a "divinely revealed Book"<sup>53</sup> and has demonstrated to humanity special qualities. This station

*pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a dis-*

*tinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.<sup>54</sup>*

In this station, the Manifestations of God are different from Each Other, yet according to the Bahá'í Writings, the process of revelation is an eternal phenomenon. Bahá'u'lláh explains that

*the manifestations of His Divine Glory and the Day Springs of eternal holiness have been sent down from time immemorial, and been commissioned to summon mankind to the One True God. That the names of some of them are forgotten and the record of their lives lost is to be attributed to the disturbances and changes that have overtaken the world.<sup>55</sup>*

'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains that "... the kingdom of God is an ancient sovereignty . . . it is not an accidental sovereignty . . ."<sup>56</sup> and therefore there have always been Manifestations of God coming to mankind and there will always be. He goes on explaining that there have been Manifestations of God one thousand years ago, even more, because the radiance and bounty of God have always existed.

As we have tried to analyze through this essay, the Manifestations of God come One after the Other and all represent a further stage in the evolutionary process that Bahá'u'lláh calls "the chain of successive Revelation"<sup>57</sup> and Their

teachings are progressive. Bahá'u'lláh thus states:

*Should the Word be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a Revelation.*

He adds:

*Their Revelation may be likened unto the light of the moon that sheddeth its radiance upon the earth. Though every time it appeareth, it revealeth a fresh measure of its brightness, yet its inherent splendour can never diminish, nor can its light suffer extinction.*<sup>58</sup>

Even if They appear at different moments in the history of mankind, and notwithstanding the differences between Them, all the Manifestations of God manifest the names and attributes of God. Bahá'u'lláh writes that “they only differ in the intensity of their revelation and the comparative potency of their light.”<sup>59</sup> The Bahá'í Texts unequivocally explain that whoever does not believe in the unity of the Manifestations of God, does not believe in the oneness of God.

## Notes

1. Balyuzi, *King of Glory* p. 7
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* p. 156
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 49-50
4. Ibid, pp. 105-6
5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Selections* p. 283
6. Ibid, p. 283
7. Ibid, p. 283
8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 220
9. Ibid, pp. 297, 61, 361
10. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 105-6
11. Ibid, p. 49
12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy* pp. 39-40
13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* p. 56
14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 341
15. Ibid, p. 341
16. Ibid, p. 366
17. Ibid, p. 411
18. Matt.7:16
19. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 79-80
20. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* pp. 240-41
21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* pp. 310
22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* p. 61
23. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 215
24. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* pp. 97, 375
25. Ibid, p. 466
26. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 195
27. Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *Advent* p. 82
28. Mark 7:6-8
29. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 56
30. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 160
31. Ibid, pp. 74,66
32. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* pp. 173
33. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p. 154
34. Ibid, pp. 151, 208, 151, 218
35. Ibid, p. 155
36. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 66-7
37. Ibid, p. 67-8
38. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* p. 66
39. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p. 146
40. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 318
41. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Dr. Forel* p. 15
42. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 49
43. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 114
44. Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *World Order* p. 113
45. Matt.19:17
46. Bahá'u'lláh, *Proclamation* p. 57
47. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* p. 41
48. John 5:19
49. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* p. 152
50. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 78
51. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* p. 108
52. Ibid, p. 108. Bahá'u'lláh in another of His Writings calls it “Supreme Sinlessness” (*Prayers and Meditations* p. 100) cf. also *God Passes By* pp. 214, 219
53. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 59-60
54. Ibid, p. 79, 74
55. Ibid, p. 174, 52
56. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 463
57. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* p. 74
58. Ibid, p. 79
59. Ibid, p. 48

# Elucidation

## Number of the Letters of the Living

*Muhammad Afnan*

### Question

I am hoping that you can clarify the number of Letters of the Living and explain why *The Dawn Breakers* presents them the way it does. I've always thought that the Báb had 18 Letters of the Living. In *The Dawn-Breakers*, in the table of illustrations, both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are listed as Letters of the Living. How can this be? What would be the most accurate response to this question: How many Letters of the Living were there? What Baha'i references answer this question and explain the meaning of 'Letter of the Living'?

### Answer

On the subject of the number of the Letters of the Living (*Huruf-i-Hayy*), of course it is 18, which numerically corresponds with *hayy*. The mistake of counting the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Letters of the Living is through misunderstanding of those who edited *The Dawn-Breakers* for publication. The publication of the attached documents (Tablets) at the beginning of the book was done in the West without the supervision of the Beloved Guardian. The Tablets in their original forms have only the title of 18 Letters of the Living in sequence as the addressees. The titles are written on the margins of Tablets in Arabic and they include the sequence of 18 Letters of the Living plus the Names of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh without having them numbered. Another fact is that those 18 Letters of the Living and the Báb Himself are also known as the First Vahid (which numerically corresponds with number 19) and Bahá'u'lláh as Him Whom God Will Make Manifest.

I hope this short explanation will help to resolve the problem. I think, if I am not mistaken, the discrepancy is removed and corrected in the latest edition of *The Dawn-Breakers*.

# Appendix I

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Ian Kluge

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Ian Kluge

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Letters of the Quranic Dispensation  
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An Exposition of the Tablet of the World (*Lawḥ-i-Dunyá*)  
James B. Thomas

Bahá’u’lláh’s First Tablet to Napoleon III  
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## Appendix II

### English-Language Publications of the ‘Irfán Colloquia

*Scripture and Revelation*, Moojan Momen (ed.), Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 199:

George Ronald, Publisher  
46 High Street  
Kidlington  
Oxford OX5 2DN, U.K.  
Tel: 44-865-841515  
Fax: 44-865-841230

*The Lights of ‘Irfán: Compilation of Papers Presented at the ‘Irfán Colloquia*, Iraj Ayman (general ed.), Book One, 2000; Book Two, 2001; Book Three, 2002; Book Four, 2003; Book Five, 2004

Also *Occasional Papers* volume 1: “Images of Christ in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” by Maryam Afshar.

‘Irfán publications may be ordered from:

Bahá’í Distribution Service (BDS)  
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Fax: 404-472-0119  
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## Appendix III

### Persian-Language Publications of the ‘Irfán Colloquia

- *Safini-yi ‘Irfán*, Books I to VII (Collections of the papers presented at the ‘Irfán Colloquia in Persian)

publications produced for and given to the participants of the ‘Irfán Colloquia:

- *Mathnavyi Abha* by F. Radmehr  
(A Commentary of the Mathnavi of Bahá’u’lláh)
- *Ráhnamay-i Mutál’i-yi-Athár-i-Qalam-A’lá*, Books I to IV  
(Guidebooks for the Study of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh)
- *Ráhnamay-i Mutál’-yi-Athár-i Hazrat-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, Books I to IV  
(Guidebook for the Study of the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá)
- *Basitu’l-Haqiqat*  
(Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb and a some explanatory articles on “Basitu’l Haqiqih”)
- *Tajjaliyyih Barkhi Jilviah-háy-i Hayát-i Bahá’í dar Zindigáni-yi Hazrat-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* by Flower Sámi  
(Manifestations of Living a Bahá’í Life as Appears in the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: a Study in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá)

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