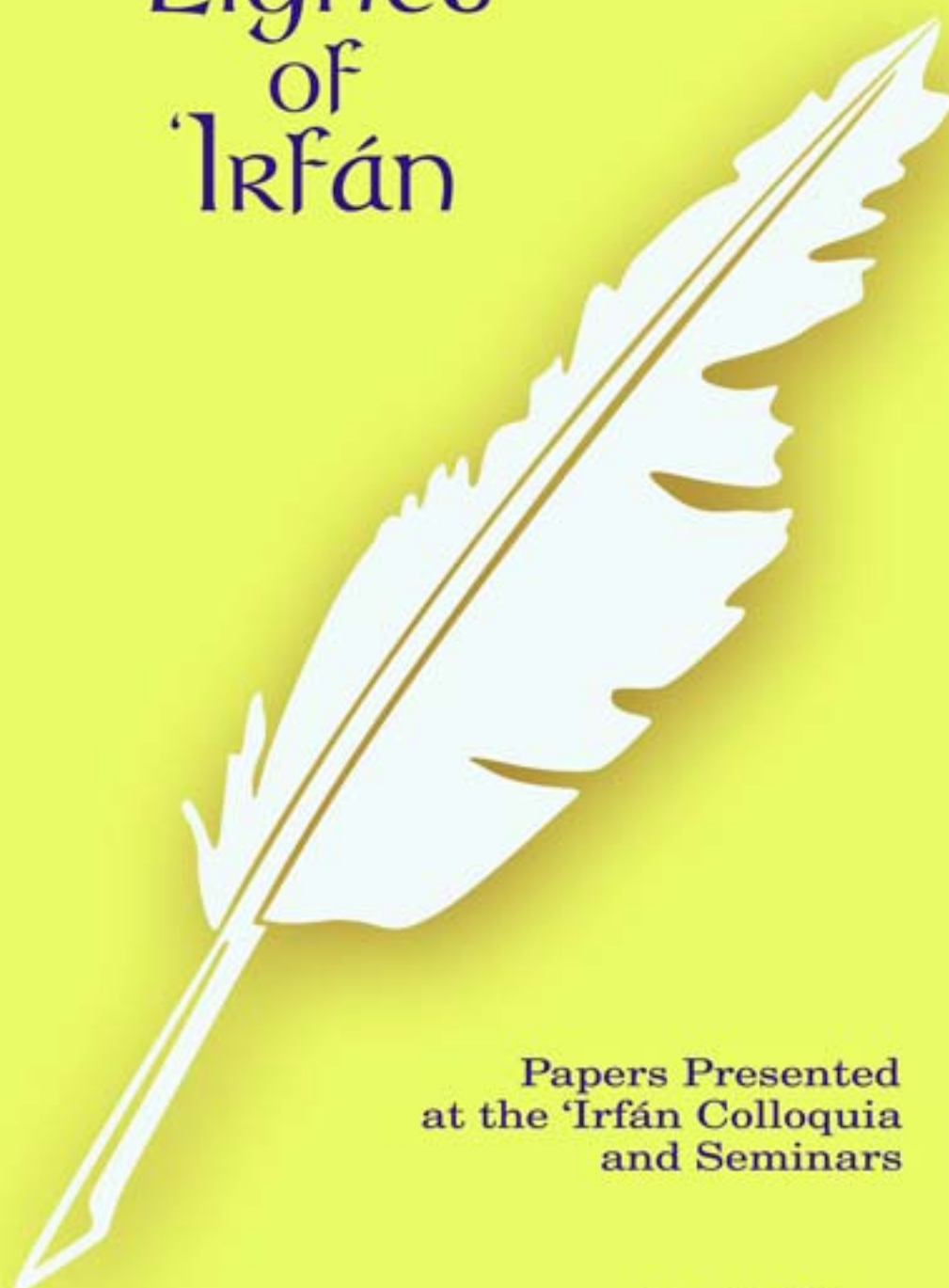


# Lights of 'Irfán



Papers Presented  
at the 'Irfán Colloquia  
and Seminars

Book Nine

# Lights of ‘Irfán

Studies in the Principal Bahá’í Beliefs

*Papers Presented at the  
‘Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*



Book Nine

Papers published in *Lights of 'Irfán* represent the views of their authors.

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Book Nine  
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*All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession. Even sovereignty has its limitations and overthrow; this is a kingship and dominion which none may usurp or destroy. Briefly, it is an eternal blessing and divine bestowal, the supreme gift of God to man.*

*‘Abdu’l-Bahá, PUP 50*



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## Preface

*Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God.*

*It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it.<sup>1</sup>*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, further expanding upon this exhortation of the Most Supreme Pen, offers this advice: “*All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is the eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight....Briefly, it is an eternal blessing and divine bestowal, the supreme gift of God to man*”<sup>2</sup> *Lights of ‘Irfán* attempts to present the end results of such investigation and research that are focused on in depth studies in the Bahá’í Writings and fundamental principles of the Bahá’í Faith. It also includes studies that, according to the guidance of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, “correlate” Bahá’í beliefs, its teachings and their significance “with the current thoughts and problems of the peoples of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

The publication of Book 9 of *The Lights of ‘Irfán* coincides with the centenary of the publication of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Some Answered Questions*, a book which most befittingly presents an example of Shoghi Effendi’s above recommendation. Celebrating this centenary, *Some Answered Questions* will be the general theme of the sessions of ‘Irfán Colloquia in 2008 and 2009. Studies related to the topics and concepts presented in that book, particularly those correlating with the current thoughts and problems of the peoples of the world, will be published in a volume dedicated to this centenary celebration.

Most of the articles published in this volume are the texts of the papers presented at the ‘Irfán Colloquia in 2007, which were held in Acuto, Italy, Bosch Bahá’í School in California and Louhelen Bahá’í School in Michigan.

The first two articles are interrelated and deal with the pivotal principle of unity in Bahá’í beliefs. They investigate the question, What philosophical viewpoints are necessary for understanding the concepts of Unity and Oneness of the world, which are ubiquitous in the Bahá’í Writings? The new vision of the “integral whole” is used to present a new worldview as the heart of the New World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. These twin articles illustrate a philosophical development that began after



the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The article on Relativism deals with the critical subject of whether religious truth is absolute or relative. It examines the subject from the perspectives of various branches of knowledge and various relativist philosophies with reference to the Bahá'í Writings and concludes that the Writings may best be described as espousing an “evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.”

Postmodernism is discussed in a two-part article. The first part is a survey of the history of postmodernism and focuses on the philosophical principles and implications particularly concerning epistemology, ontology and ethics. The second part is a comparative study that examines postmodern philosophy in relation to the Bahá'í Writings. It argues that there are coincidental or superstructural similarities but also many essential disagreements on most fundamental matters between postmodern philosophy and the Bahá'í belief system.

Two articles are reviews of certain aspects of two major works of Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* and *The Advent of Divine Justice*. The first examines salient features of the content of *Dispensation* as a proactive theological document and points out certain structural patterns in its manner of presenting theological truth. The other article is a general review of the contents of the *Advent* and its historical background. It depicts two “startling realizations”: the United States being the Cradle of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh and the North American Bahá'ís initiating the fulfillment of the goals set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of Divine Plan*. This article concludes with an analysis of the destiny of America as seen through the eyes of Shoghi Effendi, and how it relates to present world challenges.

A subject that both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh have dealt with is addressing the kings of the world. The article *From Suratu'l-mulk to Suratu'l-mulúk* is an attempt to compare and contrast these two Tablets, one revealed by the Báb and the other by Bahá'u'lláh. It deals with similarities and differences between the two texts and their historical backgrounds, as well as their structure, literary style and other textual features. It closes with some tentative conclusions about kingship and authority.

*Prayers and Rituals in the Bahá'í Faith* provides a detailed historical background and a provisional translation of a famous Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh addressed to Mullá 'Alí-Akbar Ardestání, one of the early believers and one of the first Bábís who

suffered harsh persecution. This Tablet includes, in addition to strong admonitions to those with misgivings or doubts regarding whom should be followed after the Báb, the text of *Salát-i-Hájat*, a special prayer imploring God to grant one's needs.

The article on the *Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace* is a concise, clear, and well-documented exposition of the Bahá'í perspective on peace. It demonstrates a fascinating road map illuminating the three processes humanity faces: the Lesser Peace, the Great Peace and the Most Great Peace.

*The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice* is a talk presenting an account of the challenges that were faced by Shoghi Effendi during His ministry. It also covers some aspects of the function of the Covenant in the Bahá'í community.

A very interesting and pertinent observation is presented in the article *Insider and Outsider: Scholarship in the Bahá'í Studies*. It is a preliminary approach to the differences between the works of scholars who undertake studies in the texts, teachings and history of their own belief system and scholars who engage in the same type of studies but related to belief systems other than their own. This article is more focused on these two types of studies as they relate to the Bahá'í Faith.

The location and significance of mountains in various religious traditions are discussed in the article *Prophets and Mountains*. It particularly focuses on four mountains in the Holy Land: Sinai, Zion, Tabor and Carmel that were combined in many Jewish traditions describing the End of Days and the reestablishment of the Lord's Temple. The four Mountains will be assembled together so that their summits combine to form the foundations of New Jerusalem.

The section entitled ELUCIDATIONS includes the text of a message from the Universal House of Justice regarding research and studies in the Bahá'í Faith, and a memorandum of the Bahá'í World Center concerning expectations of the return of Jesus Christ. Receiving documents and short articles elucidating and clarifying various concepts and questions regarding the verities of the Bahá'í Faith are welcome for inclusion in this section of *The Lights of 'Irfán*

For those readers interested to know the topics of the papers published in previous volumes of *The Lights of 'Irfán*, Appendix II presents a list of all those papers. It further

provides a preliminary familiarity with the range, types, and methodological approaches of the papers that are welcome for presentation at the 'Irfán Colloquia. In addition to the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia, research papers related to the main goals of the 'Irfán Colloquium may also be directly submitted for inclusion in *The Lights of 'Irfán*.

Starting with Book Six we have made two changes to the 'Irfán Colloquia's style guide. All "authoritative" publications are cited by an abbreviation; see Appendix I, "Bibliography of the Bahá'í Writings and Their Abbreviations Used in This Book." Words of Prophets/Manifestations, i.e. quotations from Sacred Writings, (not including statements by Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice), are italicized.

All papers in this volume present the views and understanding of their authors. The texts of the papers are published as provided by the authors. Their writing styles and scholarly approaches are therefore different. Articles are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the author's last names.

Iraj Ayman

Chicago, May 2008

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<sup>1</sup> TAB 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Compilation of Compilations* (Bahá'í Publications Australia) p 228

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 231

# Emergence, Enchantment, Entanglement and Excellence of the Cosmos

Wolfgang Klebel

## The Emerging Universe

The message of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is that the universe is God's creation and every created thing in this world is leading to God.

*Every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge, a sign of His sovereignty, a revelation of His names, a symbol of His majesty, a token of His power, a means of admittance into His straight Path.... (GWB 160)*

This paper is exploring how science, studying the universe, is little by little discovering this vision of Bahá'u'lláh. This development of science is in its beginning and certainly not unchallenged, nevertheless, this trend ought to be followed up by those who have a knowledge of the *Most Sublime Vision* of Bahá'u'lláh. Every scholarly engaged Bahá'í can recognize what is said about the pervasiveness and generality of this vision.

*So pervasive and general is this revelation that nothing whatsoever in the whole universe can be discovered that doth not reflect His splendor. (GWB 184)*

First some new discoveries in Neuroscience and Neurocardiology will be presented and following that the interpretations of Quantum Mechanics, as presented today in numerous books will be sorted out from this perspective. The emergence of a new understanding of the universe is becoming a popular topic and the horizon of this development cannot be defined, as of yet.

That means that we can ask questions today in order to understand what the new view of the world means to Bahá'í theology, but we must be ready to revise them over time, as the scientific knowledge and the understanding of the Revelation is

constantly evolving in a progressive process. We can only see what is available today and have to develop our understanding in a progressive evolution, which will abolish some ideas, will change others, and will find new answers to the question of the harmony between religion and science in the future. If this approach is used in keeping the Covenant of the Faith, it will not endanger, but enhance our understanding of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

The following two sections are rather brief and provisionally, yet they are inserted here to demonstrate that many aspects of modern science correspond and sometimes support concepts and thoughts presented in the Bahá'í Scriptures. That does not necessarily mean that these findings prove anything about the Bahá'í Cause, but it makes the message of Bahá'u'lláh less open to attacks from science, as the Christian message was attacked by a materialistic and mechanistic scientific world view. The Christian message, as presented in the different churches, was at the time in clear opposition to scientific progress.

It is a personal experience of this writer as to how much more difficult it is to believe in and defend the Christian theology, which requires a philosophical separation between religion and science, than to attempt the same with the Bahá'í Faith, which has as one of its principles the harmony of science and religion. That was why Teilhard de Chardin had so many difficulties with the church, yet was having such a great impact on religious thought, because he tried to avoid this separation and used his scientific expertise to write his book *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959). In it he attempts to explain that the Christian message, if understood progressively, is not in contradiction with the modern idea of evolution, but can be translated into these new conceptualizations of progression and unification. Teilhard was and is often misunderstood and misused, nevertheless his influence is still remarkable.

## Neurocardiology

The common medical understanding of the heart as a mechanical pump was in drastic contradiction to the historical understanding of the heart as the center and locus of personal self. Writing about the Education of the Heart Thomas Taaffe stated that this old and traditional understanding is based on the heart in a metaphorical sense only, implying that there is no reality to the metaphor of the heart as expressing the inmost self and our true identity. Science has recently discovered that

the old understanding of the heart as the center of emotions and health is more realistic and can be researched scientifically.

The new science of neurocardiology attributes to the heart the ability to have memory, to learn, to make decisions and communicate with the brain, yet there is no consciousness in these functions of the heart. According to McCraty et al.:

The heart is a sensory organ and an information encoding and processing center with an extensive intrinsic nervous system, enabling it to learn, remember and make functional decision independent of the cranial brain.

While these neurological pathways do not directly explain the above mentioned structure of the process, they might give us an indication that this spiritual process has its physiological correspondence in the human heart, nervous system, and brain. It has also been established that the heart is the first to perceive input from the perception through the senses. As a matter of fact, it could be proven experimentally that changes in sensual input are detected by the heart seconds before the random computer program is started that will select the presentation to the senses.

Of greatest significance here is our major finding, namely, the electrophysiological evidence that the heart is directly involved in the processing of information about a future emotional stimulus seconds before the body actually experiences the stimulus.” ... “The heart appears to play a direct role in the perception of future events.

This fact of intuition of future events can only be explained scientifically if we consider the physical reality as seen in quantum mechanics. This will be explained below in the section dealing with physics and quantum mechanics. The heart, which is a key concept in the Bahá'í Writings, and its physical and spiritual capabilities, is a topic that certainly needs further research. Here a short anticipatory comment must suffice.

What is most important in the context of this paper is the fact that the heart is a sophisticated information processing center.

An understanding of the complex anatomy and function of the heart's nervous system contributes an additional dimension to the newly emerging view of the heart as a sophisticated information processing center, functioning not only in concert with the brain but also independent of

it. Further exploration of the part, that neurocardiological interactions play in sustaining healthy functioning may permit a more comprehensive understanding of the heart's multidimensional role in facilitating successful adaptation to the challenges of daily living.

Furthermore, it must be emphasized that, according to these new findings about the heart, the influence the heart has into the physiological, ethical and social well being of man needs to be further investigated and compared with the Bahá'í statements about the theological importance of the heart.

During states of psycho-physiological coherence, bodily systems function with a high degree of synchronization, efficiency, and harmony and the body's natural regenerative processes appear to be facilitated. Psychologically, this mode is associated with improved cognitive performance, increased emotional stability, and enhanced psychosocial function and the quality of life. Additionally, many people report experiencing a notable reduction in inner mental dialogue along with feelings of increased peace, self-security, and sustained positive emotions after practicing maintaining this mode even for short periods such as a few days or weeks.

To appreciate the following Hidden Word of Bahá'u'lláh about the heart becomes much more reasonable when it is placed in the context of the new scientific findings about the sensory capacity and ability of the heart to "learn, remember and make functional decision," so that we can talk about the knowledge and wisdom of the heart from a scientific point of view.

*Quaff from the tongue of the merciful the stream of divine mystery, and behold from the dayspring of divine utterance the unveiled splendor of the daystar of wisdom. Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of the heart, and water them with the waters of certitude, that the hyacinths of knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green from the holy city of the heart. (HW P78)*

## Neuroscience

Besides the unifying power of the heart, which has been described above, some ideas about the human mind or intellect will be added here.

The picture of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel is taken from a book with the title *The Humanizing Brain, Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*. It is here reproduced in order to show how in the artist's imagination of a truth can be expressed that will take centuries to be fully understood.

As can be clearly seen below, the cloud around God the Creator has the shape of the human brain. Michelangelo was familiar with this shape and most likely selected it to show that man was created in the image of God, and the brain (or the mind, the human consciousness) is the most obvious element in man that can show this similarity in the image of God. It seems that "Michelangelo meant to portray that what God is giving to Adam is the intellect, and thus man is able to plan the best and highest and to try all things received." The authors continue to say: "Since we are created in the image and likeness of God, we have the ability to think and imagine and decide - yes, and the ability to distort and destroy."

This ability of the heart was described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in similar words:

*He has bestowed upon him the power of intellect so that through the attribute of reason, when fortified by the Holy Spirit, he may penetrate and discover ideal realities and become informed of the mysteries of the world of significances.* (PUP 303)

In the above mentioned book it is stated that the human mind, as recently studied in neuroscience, presents a picture of the nature of God as perceived in traditional religion, a speculation that might go sometimes too far in speaking about God; but it indicates the way the human brain and mind is part of this world, and that consciousness is related to the material aspect of this universe. Much more about this ability of the human mind has recently been said in the interpretation of the findings of quantum mechanics and has been developed by many other writers, especially in the context of quantum mechanics and its implications.

## Unity in Quantum Mechanics

It is commonly accepted that the findings of quantum mechanics have consequences that reach into metaphysics and ontology. "It should be clear by now that one of the fundamental problems thrown up by quantum mechanics in general, and the measuring problem, in particular, is the nature



of reality – what is it that ‘really exists’ in the universe?”

The different interpretations of these connections fill books; how far these applications can go was described by E. H. Walker. At a conference at “New Visions of Reality”, sponsored by the Department of Physics of the University of Berkeley, and in the *Journal of Time, Space and Knowledge*, Evan Harris Walker stated: “What we have been doing here is laying the foundations for a religion of the twenty first century,” and he reports that he was astounded “how quickly the other speakers agreed with this assessment of a meeting in which neither God nor religion had figured as the primary topic.”

Most books on this topic try to insert these new ideas into Buddhist or Hindu thinking, into some New Age cosmology, or into the mystic traditions. The value and meaning of these diverse interpretations can be questioned. But these different interpretations make one thing clear, i.e., we cannot understand the new findings of quantum mechanics unless we place them in a philosophical and/or theological conceptual frame.

When writers attempt to conceptualize the new findings of Quantum Mechanics using old religious or philosophical conceptualizations, they frequently make the logical failure Ken Wilber calls the Pre/Trans Fallacy. In short, they think that an early developmental state can be compared to a more recent and more differentiated one, because often the undifferentiated magic, mythic or pre-rational notion looks for the superficial observer similar to a later differentiated and higher developed concept.

It is therefore easy to understand that Hindu, Buddhist, Biblical and other early conceptualization are used to explain the findings of Quantum Mechanics. The words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the *new age* and all the *new discoveries in science* indicate *that the old ways, the old concepts, are gone and forgotten* (SWAB 253). This is the truth of all Revelations and it is clearly stated in the Bible (Mark 2:22) in the form of the parable of the wineskins, translated as bottles in the King James translation.

And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.

Therefore, only those interpretations, which can be understood within the Vision of Bahá'u'lláh were used by this writer. And that is deliberate and required by the concept of

progressive theology.

In introducing this topic it must be noted that nothing fits the following description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá better than the findings of quantum mechanics:

*All the sciences and arts we now enjoy and utilize were once mysteries, and according to the mandates of nature should have remained hidden and latent, but the human intellect has broken through the laws surrounding them and discovered the underlying realities. The mind of man has taken these mysteries out of the plane of invisibility and brought them into the plane of the known and visible.*  
(PUP 351)

The science of quantum mechanics certainly is a breakthrough and a discovery of underlying realities, taken by the "*mind of man [from] the plane of invisibility ... into the plane of the known and visible*" through the science of the smallest particles of matter. Events observed in experiments at the microscopic level of subatomic particles are experimentally transferred to macroscopic effects through the instruments of observation, which transfer the effect of these microscopic events to the scientific macroscopic apparatus, such as a Geiger counter. In this way "*the mind of man has taken these mysteries out of the plane of invisibility and brought them into the plane of the known and visible.*"

It needs to be considered that 'Abdu'l-Bahá said these words about the scientific discoveries of His days, such as electricity, x-rays, radio and other new inventions of the time; nevertheless, these words fit equally well to the newest and most innovative findings of modern science.

Quantum mechanics is introduced here for two reasons. One is the change quantum mechanics has made to the cosmology and the presuppositions of the mechanistic milieu of modern science - away from a materialistic and reductionistic viewpoint toward an understanding, which is more open to spiritual issues. The other is that some of these findings and of their philosophical interpretations are in surprising harmony with the philosophical and theological implications of the Bahá'í Writings, as will be shown below.

This later point will be portrayed here with the understanding that the surprising development of quantum mechanics out of the physics of the smallest particles has not happened just "naturally" but rather follows this statement of Bahá'u'lláh:

*All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name. In the days to come, ye will, verily, behold things of which ye have never heard before. (GWB 141)*

Of all the achievements of science and technology, especially in the area of the natural sciences and physics, the findings of quantum mechanics, developed during the last century, and their interpretations can certainly best be described “*as wondrous achievement, ... of which ye have never heard before.*” Two things must be noted about this statement. Bahá’u’lláh predicts these wondrous achievements in general, and He claims that they are a direct consequence of His revelation of the name “*the Fashioner*” as one of the names of God presented in His Writings.

Additionally, quantum mechanics is not only such an achievement, it further stimulates explanations, at least in some of its interpretations, which make it easier to understand many of the statements of Bahá’u’lláh about the renewal of the whole world through His Revelation. Even in the Christian context, it explains how to understand the words about Christ, by Whom everything was made, as stated in the prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-3):

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.*

In describing quantum mechanics there are several possible approaches. While even simple textbooks mention that the findings of this science have repercussions in the fields of cosmology, of philosophy and metaphysics, there are a number of scientific and popular books, mostly written by physicists, which develop these inferences in the different fields of thinking.

In this paper we will take some new concepts of quantum mechanics and develop their implication towards the Bahá’í Revelation. The different reference books are chosen as samples of how this new understanding can be presented; the last book of E. H. Walker was chosen because its findings are the most interesting for this writer and are most in harmony with the topic of this paper.

Quantum mechanics will here be presented under the topics of Enchantment through Spiritualization, Emergence of the

New Creation, Entanglement in Unity, and Excellence of the Human Mind and Consciousness. These concepts and findings will be compared with ideas presented in the Bahá'í Writings.

## Enchantment through Spirituality

Ervin Laszlo in his book *Science and the Reenchantment of the Cosmos*, *The Rise of the Integral Vision of Reality* describes the changes quantum mechanics has made to the understanding of the cosmos:

The current finding of the universe's wholeness is the fruit of sustained investigation, based on observation and tested by experiment. It provides an entirely different image of the world than the mechanistic, materialistic and fragmented image we were taught in school. A cosmos that is connected, coherent, and whole recalls an ancient notion that was present in the tradition of every civilization; it is an enchanted cosmos. (2)

In this book Laszlo connects the findings of quantum mechanics with the Hindu concept of the Akashi Field and develops an Integral vision of Reality in the sense of a "first meeting-ground between science and spirituality." (p. 93) As with many of the new books using quantum mechanics as a philosophical springboard to the area of spirituality, it is not necessary to follow all of their conclusions while evaluating their contributions.

In this case it is the connection with Hindu philosophy, which we cannot follow except in the sense of a unity of all religions. Other issues elucidated are valuable, i.e., the enchantment of the cosmos compared to the traditional and "objective" concept of classical scientific and deterministic cosmology, which can be described as a worldview devoid of spirituality, value and meaning.

The meaning of the word enchantment here is obviously not "bewitchment" but "fascination." Both meanings are used in the translation of the Bahá'í Writings, and they are clearly distinguished. Here a verse is presented from a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh, in which He compares the ordeal of the martyrs of the Faith with the Divine presence as Enchanter of the worlds in a question.

*The bodies of Thy chosen ones lie quivering on distant sands: Where is the ocean of Thy presence, O Enchanter of*

*the worlds?* (BP 212)

In order to understand this comparison, one must accept the Vision of Bahá'u'lláh, which includes the following belief expressed in another prayer:

*Had not every tribulation been made the bearer of Thy wisdom, and every ordeal the vehicle of Thy providence, no one would have dared oppose us, though the powers of earth and heaven were to be leagued against us.* (PM 14)

The apparent contradiction of gruesome martyrdom with an enchanting world, created by a loving God, who is called the Enchanter, can only be solved when we accept the Vision that all ordeals are signs of God's providence and wisdom. This is, according to Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted by Shoghi Effendi, the newness of the whole world and the fruit of His Revelation which He compares with the "loftiest trees" and its most "enchanting blossoms," which are the most "heavenly blessings."

"The whole earth," writes Bahá'u'lláh, "is now in a state of pregnancy. The day is approaching when it will have yielded its noblest fruits, when from it will have sprung forth the loftiest trees, the most enchanting blossoms, the most heavenly blessings. Immeasurably exalted is the breeze that wafteth from the garment of thy Lord, the Glorified! For lo, it hath breathed its fragrance and made all things new! Well is it with them that comprehend." (WOB 169)

Consequently, it could be said that quantum mechanics opens up the possibility of understanding the world as the fascinating Creation of God, which Bahá'u'lláh reveals to us in His new and Most Sublime Vision.

## Emergence of the New Creation

The Nobel Prize laureate in physics, Robert B. Laughlin, developed the concept of emergence in his book *A different Universe, Reinventing physics from the bottom down*. He considers this change as so important that he formulates it as a new age, stating

I think a good case can be made that science has now moved from an Age of Reductionism to an Age of Emergence, a time when the search for ultimate causes of things shifts from the behavior of parts to the behavior of the collective. (208)

In other words, reality is defined by a view that takes the whole into consideration, and this whole is a whole that integrates its parts; it is an integrated whole, as described in the section on philosophy of the previous paper “Unity of Revelation / Revelation of Unity.” The concept of emergence as presented by Laughlin includes a different understanding of reality in which the truth or certainty of a statement is not caused by its reduction to the smallest parts but by recognizing its organization on a specific level. This principle is accepted by modern biology as well and has been described psychologically and philosophically by Ken Wilber in his concept of the Holon. Holons are at the same time parts of higher Holons and at the same time have lower Holons as their parts.

According to Laughlin, reality is not an aggregate of elements amassed by the physical deterministic principles of cause and effects, but it is a product in a hierarchal order established by collective organizations on the different levels of reality. This is his understanding of the consequences of quantum mechanics in understanding the reality of this world.

The concept of emergence implies that the world is not organized from the bottom up, i.e., in a reductionistic and atomistic sense, but that the bottom, i.e., the atoms or smallest particles, indicate that the world is organized in a meaningful and hierarchical way, which cannot be explained in any reductionistic manner:

It is not uncommon for a committed reductionist to dismiss the evidence of the fundamental nature of collective principles on the grounds that there actually is a deductive path from the microscopic that explains the reproducibility of these experiments. This is incorrect. (ibid. 19)

This emergence and collective structure of reality originates in the fact of Creation, as Bahá'u'lláh revealed:

*Nothing short of His all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy, could have possibly achieved it. How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being?* (GWB, XXVII, 64-65)

This statement can certainly be understood in the sense that all emergence of unity at any level of reality is caused by God, by His “all-encompassing grace” and His “all-pervading mercy,”

i.e., by the creative power of God “the Unifier.” Therefore we are admonished to

*...strive ye to knit together the hearts of men, in His Name, the Unifier, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. (GWB 8)*

Shoghi Effendi applies this principle of unification to the social and political unity of the world. He points out that unity has been misconceived in the past as uniformity, clearly referring to the classical view of the reality as particularistic and mechanistic, where unity can only be understood as forced uniformity, or to the fact that unity could be just a magical or utopian concept and not the reality of unity in diversity in the Bahá’í sense.

*The principle of unification which it advocates and with which it stands identified they have misconceived as a shallow attempt at uniformity, its repeated assertions of the reality of supernatural agencies they have condemned as a vain belief in magic, and the glory of its idealism they have rejected as mere utopia. (WOB 73)*

He further explains this unity of society and of religion as evolutionary or progressive and gradual, exemplifying it in the different forms of social unity during the history of humanity.

Just as the organic evolution of mankind has been slow and gradual, and involved successively the unification of the family, the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, so has the light vouchsafed by the Revelation of God, at various stages in the evolution of religion, and reflected in the successive Dispensations of the past, been slow and progressive. Indeed the measure of Divine Revelation, in every age, has been adapted to, and commensurate with, the degree of social progress achieved in that age by a constantly evolving humanity. (PDC 118)

The emergence of humanity and the gradual development of society and civilization in history are described by Shoghi Effendi as an internal process, requiring new virtues and moral standards, and higher capacities of humankind. He describes this newness as a process that leads humanity from the state of adolescence towards maturity.

Humanity has emerged from its former state of limitation and preliminary training. Man must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new

capacities. New bounties, perfect bestowals, are awaiting and already descending upon him. The gifts and blessings of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity. (WOB 165)

## Entanglement in Unity

Giancarlo Ghirardi, the chair of the Department of Theoretical Physics at the University of Trieste, described the concept of entanglement in his book, *Sneaking a Look at God's Cards, Unraveling the Mysteries of Quantum Mechanics*. This book gives a historical description of quantum mechanics without omitting the rather difficult conceptualizations necessary to understand its development.

In quantum mechanics, entanglement is developed from the findings that

Practically every interaction [of particles] brings with it a loss of identity of the systems that are interacting. But since in the long run everything in practice interacts with everything, what emerges is a vision of the universe as an 'unbroken whole,' an undivided unity whose parts no longer have any identity. The theory implies a fundamentally holistic vision of the universe. (190)

The analysis of this process of entanglement

brings an extension of the holistic view of reality even at the macroscopic level and in practice for all the physical systems of the universe. It was not by chance that David Bohm and Basil Hiley entitled their recent book *The Undivided Universe*. (191)

This process has been developed under the name of entanglement:

The original German expression used by Schrödinger, *Verschränkung*, has become known in the scientific literature as "entanglement. (165)

Erwin Schrödinger, born near Vienna, Austria, (1887-1961) formulated the importance of this concept:

I consider [Entanglement or "Verschränkung"] not as one, but as the characteristic trait of Quantum Mechanics, the one that enforces its entire departure from classical lines



of thought.

Ghirardi concludes

The analysis [of entanglement] brings an extension of the holistic view of reality, even at the macroscopic level and in practice for all the physical systems of the universe.

In other words all parts of the universe are entangled, interwoven or intertwined with each other; the universe is a whole and is organized as mentioned above in emerging units on all levels of existence.

The physical unity of the universe and its emerging hierarchical order is best described in the Bahá'í Writings by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (sentences separated by this writer):

*The rational proof of this is that the atoms of the material elements are transferable from one form of existence to another, from one degree and kingdom to another, lower or higher.*

*For example, an atom of the soil or dust of earth may traverse the kingdoms from mineral to man by successive incorporations into the bodies of the organisms of those kingdoms.*

*At one time it enters into the formation of the mineral or rock; it is then absorbed by the vegetable kingdom and becomes a constituent of the body and fibre of a tree; again it is appropriated by the animal, and at a still later period is found in the body of man.*

*Throughout these degrees of its traversing the kingdoms from one form of phenomenal being to another, it retains its atomic existence and is never annihilated nor relegated to nonexistence. (PUP 87-88)*

This description of the way of an atom from mineral to human is a clear description of the entanglement of all physical elements as well as of the emergence of organization on different levels of reality, which levels are here called kingdoms. In a letter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá added to this description that unity is a product of attraction and love:

*O honoured lady! Look about thee at the world: here unity, mutual attraction, gathering together, engenders life, but disunity and inharmony spell death.*

*"When thou dost consider all phenomena, thou wilt see*

*that every created thing hath come into being through the mingling of many elements, and once this collectivity of elements is dissolved, and this harmony of components is dissevered, the life form is wiped out. (SWA 3)*

Again, the created reality is considered in its structure as it emerges in the integral combination of its elements on the different levels of existence. It is important to realize that 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses the unification of the elements through mutual attraction as the dynamic principle of this process. This mutual attraction is a consequence of God's love for the world, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The harmony of their collective structure is stressed here, and how disharmony and disunity creates death or the end of their reality.

Concluding this section it can be summarized in this statement of Bahá'u'lláh – that the unity of the world of being is the concealed power underlying creation. This sentence introduces the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh appointing 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His successor, but it could as well be understood in a wider sense as the *mighty unifying force* holding together not only the covenant but also and fundamentally the *world of being*:

*O ye My Branches! A mighty force, a consummate power lieth concealed in the world of being. Fix your gaze upon it and upon its unifying influence, and not upon the differences which appear from it. (TB 221)*

## Excellence of the Human Mind and Consciousness

Here in this section the most daring conclusions from the findings of quantum mechanics are presented. They have been questioned and doubted, depending on the bias of their critics, but have not been disproved. Quantum mechanics depends widely on conceptualization, and making conclusions from the findings in the subatomic level to the phenomenal world of human reality is necessary in order to understand it. How far these conclusions can go and remain still scientific and true is hard to evaluate. In this case the closeness of these conclusions to statements of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh presents an added proof, at least for those thinkers who accept this Revelation. The fact that, at least in some ways, these findings are in harmony with certain passages from the Christian Revelation as well, give them an added aspect of truth for the followers of Christianity.

Bahá'u'lláh explains the power of the human mind in the

following statement:

*Say: Spirit, mind, soul, and the powers of sight and hearing are but one single reality which hath manifold expressions owing to the diversity of its instruments. As thou dost observe, man's power to comprehend, move, speak, hear, and see all derive from this sign of his Lord within him. It is single in its essence, yet manifold through the diversity of its instruments.*

*Reflect upon this subject that thou mayest comprehend the true meaning of what hath been intended, find thyself independent of the sayings of the people, and be of them that are well assured. In like manner, when this sign of God turneth towards the brain, the head, and such means, the powers of the mind and the soul are manifested. Thy Lord, verily, is potent to do whatsoever He pleaseth. (SLH 154)*

The spirit, the mind and/or the soul are a single reality - are, as Bahá'u'lláh reveals “*single in its essence, yet manifold through the diversity of its instruments.*” In other words, the singleness of the mind cannot be studied except through the difference and the diversity of its physical instruments in the material body. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh says “*man's power to comprehend, move, speak, hear, and see all derive from this sign of his Lord within him,*” which means that the power of the mind is exerted through the senses and the human ability to move, speak and hear. The mind is described here as the manifestation of the “*sign of his Lord within*”, but it can only be seen in its effect in the material world. It is important that the mind is effective in the physical world, which usually is understood by the concept of free will, and that the mind, or the spiritual aspect of man, as it is expressed in the human mind, can therefore be studied only in its effects on the material world, when it is expressed in speech, in movement and/or when it communicates with other minds.

This will be described below in the comments on a book about the Quantum Mind by E. H Walker, *The Physics of Consciousness, the Quantum Mind and the Meaning of Life*. Walker calls the cause of these changes the Quantum Mind, and attributes to this mind powers that have been described before only in theological writings, describing God or God's Word in its universal and fundamental power.

How did E. H. Walker do this? What follows is a

concentrated and simplified summary of this book. As a physicist he said he is interested in reality, in everything that is real. And, consciousness is a fact of reality; we all have it and know it. How can a physicist approach it? The same way any other new phenomena in physics were recognized in the past. For example, when electricity was recognized as a reality that was unknown before, physicists developed methods and approaches that connected this new reality with known things and developed a new aspect of physics.

Walker tries the same approach with consciousness. First he defines it as not material and not mechanical, later as non-local and non-time dependent, all of which we know from knowing our mind. This definition actually can be said to define spirituality, or as the Bahá'í Writings say, the Unseen, the Hidden, Inwardness, contrasting it with the Seen, the Manifest, Outwardness, or in the above quoted passage, "*sign of his Lord within.*"

Then Walker says that we all know this consciousness of humankind acts on the physical reality of this world; i.e., the human consciousness has changed the world much more than the mighty dinosaurs. Bahá'u'lláh said something very similar in the quote above, i.e., that we know of the spiritual, the mind or soul only through its "*expressions owing to the diversity of its instruments.*"

Walker studies what we know about consciousness and how it acts on physical reality. He develops, in typical scientific manner for example, the field of consciousness, describing its speed of change as  $1/25$  of a second (if the pictures or the movie goes slower, we see them separate; if they are faster we blend them together, because consciousness does it that way). Then he describes the dimension of consciousness, explaining the size of the visual field during that fraction of second and brings in a certain number of "bits of information" that are transferred through the two million nerves from the eye to the brain. He knows the speed these nerves fire, and he can, in this way, mathematically describe the field of consciousness. He brings many other numbers together that define consciousness from neurophysiologic research, and develops his view of consciousness from the point of view as it affects physical reality.

And then he asks: how does this consciousness, this non material mind, make the brain do things with the body, with matter, like move, etc., which obviously is where the rubber

meets the road, where consciousness (and he appropriately includes here free will) affects physical reality.

To the contrary, the classical understanding in science was expressed in psychology by the behaviorist Skinner, who tried to solve the problem by negating mind and will, and claiming that our brain, which he calls an unknown black box, is exclusively determined by conditioning from the outside. This conditioning he then studies physically and materially, since it fits into the deterministic and materialistic cause and effect thinking of science. During my studies in psychology this understanding was in vogue, and I had a seminar on this rather strange and reductionistic approach, which was proven by Skinner in his experiments with the pigeon (and his young daughter) in the famous “Skinner box.”

Contrary to this, Walker would claim that all “scientific” denial of consciousness, of the mind or its reduction to neurophysiologic facts, is not really required by science but only by the materialistic and reductionistic bias of science, which developed from Newton’s mechanistic cosmology. He discusses several of these attempts, for example the work of the Churchlands, among others.

What is quite interesting is that Walker’s conclusions about the interaction between the spiritual (consciousness) and the physical is derived from some findings of quantum mechanics, and yet it fit surprisingly well in the description of the mind by Bahá’u’lláh, Who stated that *“Spirit, mind, soul, and the powers of sight and hearing are but one single reality which hath manifold expressions owing to the diversity of its instruments.”* (SLH 154) In other words, what Bahá’u’lláh reveals about the mind, the soul or the spirit is the fact that it is a single reality, therefore not physically located or describable, but this reality is expressed in the diversity of its instruments, which are the sensual and physical characteristics of the human brain and body.

According to Walker, the human mind or consciousness can be measured and physically described by its effects on the brain’s nervous synapses and consequently on the physical brain and nervous system that directs all bodily actions. According to Bahá’u’lláh, the human mind, soul or spirit finds its expression in its bodily instruments, which is saying almost the same from the other aspect of the relationship.

Seen from the world of physics we have to explain how this

spiritual aspect of man, his consciousness and mind, causes change in the material world. This Walker attempts to do. Seen from a spiritual point of view, we need to look at this question by asking how this spiritual element in man expresses itself in the physical world. Bahá'u'lláh states it expresses itself through its instruments, i.e. through the bodily senses and movements.

The astounding fact in this comparison is the new science of quantum mechanics, which according to Walker gives an explanation of this possibility of the spiritual affecting the material in quantum events in the synapses of the nervous system in the brain. These quantum effects, which are not deterministically defined by cause and effect, can be influenced by the observer, i.e., by consciousness of the human mind.

Therefore, according to Walker, the spiritual mind can influence matter at the level of the undetermined quantum processes in the brain's synapses that are small enough to allow quantum effects to happen. Walker describes this process in detail with the physics of quantum mechanics. In the context of this description he explains a number of functions of the mind, like sleep, ability to influence matter in rare cases, and why the power of the mind is usually restricted, as common sense experience tells us. Another not yet considered question is the effect of the little brain of the heart (as described above), which does not have consciousness. Walker does not consider this, but it needs to be included in this equation, a rather new and difficult task that this writer will develop in a later paper.

In the following we will take some concluding statements by Walker and compare them with statements from the Bahá'í Writings, drawing inferences from one to the other. The reader is referred to the book of Walker to see how he came to these conclusions, because, to describe these details here would breach the format of this paper.

When talking about the history of the big bang theory Walker states:

Consciousness may also exist somewhere without being part of either a living body or a data-processing system.  
(256)

This indicates that consciousness is transpersonal and not confined to the human person. Interestingly enough even Aristotle had said that the mind (nous) is coming from the outside. Then Walker relates the mind to quantum mechanics when, in summarizing, he said:

We have found that in their essential nature, quantum fluctuations are the stuff of consciousness and will.

And now, here, we find that this mind stuff was the beginning point of the universe – the stuff that out of a formless void created everything that was created. (334)

This is what Walker calls the Quantum Mind, which he describes as being the beginning of the universe and the underlying power of its existence.

In his chapter about “A God for Tomorrow,” Walker claims that

Everyone worships reality. Each person looks about him, listens a moment – listens as long as life will let him pause to listen – and then he falls down and worships whatever it is that looks like this is what it is all about. (372)

As a conclusion of his research into the reality of consciousness Walker then concludes:

There must exist a supreme Consciousness out of which everything else springs. (334)

Then he describes this reality (the sentence is here broken up to better compare its structure):

We discover that in the beginning, there was the Quantum Mind,

- a first cause
- itself time-independent
- and non-local
- that created space time and matter/energy.

In this quote from Walker, he seems to say something rather unexpected. He speaks about the Quantum Mind (which is capitalized by Walker), and gives Him attributes that do not fit to anybody else than the Manifestations.

First cause relates to the Big Bang theory, as Walker explains it, because the origin of all that came to exist is Consciousness.

This consciousness of the Quantum Mind is time-independent, another conclusion from quantum mechanics, and it is also non-local which was proven experimentally; one electron can influence its pair even if they are separated by wide distances. If one is observed as a wave or as particle, the other will be the same, and there is no possibility of physical

communication in space and time between these particles or waves. This unity of all particles and of the whole cosmos is called entanglement as described above. There are other non-local relationships in quantum mechanics, and Walker describes how the brain's consciousness functions on that basis.

In the following these three attributes given to the Quantum Mind (i.e., being time-independent, non-local, and the first cause of everything) are compared to how Bahá'u'lláh describe the Manifestations, albeit in different words but with a similar meaning, at least as I read it today.

The issue of First cause is expressed in this statement by Bahá'u'lláh:

*Nay, all else besides these Manifestations, live by the operation of Their Will, and move and have their being through the outpourings of Their grace. (GWB 179)*

The fact of the Manifestations being time-independent can be compared to the statement from the *Kitáb-i-Şqán* about the Manifestations:

*Even as in the 'Beginning that hath no beginnings' the term 'last' is truly applicable unto Him who is the Educator of the visible and of the invisible, in like manner, are the terms 'first' and 'last' applicable unto His Manifestations. They are at the same time the Exponents of both the 'first' and the 'last.' (KI 163)*

About the issue of non-locality, that plays an important role in quantum mechanics and is an attribute of the Quantum Mind in the description of Walker. The following can be said in comparison to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh about the Manifestations:

*Whilst walking amongst mortals, they soar in the heaven of the divine presence. Without feet they tread the path of the spirit, and without wings they rise unto the exalted heights of divine unity. With every fleeting breath they cover the immensity of space and at every moment traverse the kingdoms of the visible and the invisible. (KI 66)*

The Quantum Mind described by Walker above is the first cause and the creator of time and energy. This compares with the statement of Bahá'u'lláh about the Manifestations:

*Thus it is that through the rise of these Luminaries of God*



*the world is made new, the waters of everlasting life stream forth, the billows of loving-kindness surge, the clouds of grace are gathered, and the breeze of bounty bloweth upon all created things.* (KI 33)

Closer and more basic to Walker's understanding of religion is probably the quote from the Gospel of John (1:1-3), repeated here in the same sense of Christ, the Word, being the creator of everything:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

We need to mention here again that there is much more to know in the future about this surprising correlation of modern physics with the Bahá'í Writings, and progress of theology in understanding the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh will give new and deeper meaning to all of these Revelations. It must be emphasized that this is what we can see today, contemplating the *wondrous achievement* of modern physics, cosmology and ontology. The harmony between science and religion is constituted by this progress of both, of science and of theology, coming closer as humanity progresses.

## Conclusions

In the book of Revelation (21:5) the returning Christ is on the Throne of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is described as the New Heaven and the New Earth, and it is said about Him:

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.

It is the thesis of this paper that this prophesy has been verified in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Who is regarded by Bahá'ís as the return of Christ and of all previous Manifestations or Luminaries.

*Thus it is that through the rise of these Luminaries of God the world is made new, the waters of everlasting life stream forth, the billows of loving-kindness surge, the clouds of grace are gathered, and the breeze of bounty bloweth upon all created things.* (KI 33)

How do we understand this? Bahá'u'lláh clearly explains what is understood with New Heaven and New Earth when He said:

*On the contrary, by the term “earth” is meant the earth of understanding and knowledge, and by “heavens” the heavens of divine Revelation. Reflect thou, how, in one hand, He hath, by His mighty grasp, turned the earth of knowledge and understanding, previously unfolded, into a mere handful, and, on the other, spread out a new and highly exalted earth in the hearts of men, thus causing the freshest and loveliest blossoms, and the mightiest and loftiest trees to spring forth from the illumined bosom of man. (KI 47-48)*

In this paper this earth of understanding and knowledge was followed up, especially as it is new and has changed the whole conception of this world *“in the hearts of men.”*

Concluding, it has to be kept in mind that all the ideas presented in this paper are provisional and related to the present level of understanding science, as well as, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, with the understanding that both the processes of science and the comprehension of the Revelation are progressive. So, any conclusion presented here needs to be revised over time. The major conclusion of this paper can be summarized in the following sentence:

Metaphysics and physics of consciousness can facilitate the understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation, if compared to the sacred Writings of the Faith.

The absolute newness of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and how it requires a new understanding of this world was expressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

*Until the old ways, the old concepts, are gone and forgotten, this world of being will find no peace. (SWAB 253)*

In a more prophetic and mystic pronouncement, this was stated by Bahá'u'lláh in a Hidden Word as a condition of understanding His *Most Sublime Vision* ... *“that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness”*

*Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty; stop thine ears, that thou mayest hearken unto the sweet melody of My voice; empty thyself of all learning, that thou mayest partake of My knowledge; and sanctify thyself from riches, that thou mayest obtain a lasting share from the ocean of My eternal wealth. Blind thine eyes, that*

*is, to all save My beauty; stop thine ears to all save My word; empty thyself of all learning save the knowledge of Me; that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness. (PHW 11)*

# Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Sublime Vision"

Wolfgang Klebel

## Introduction

While the concept of Unity in the Bahá'í Faith is central and well documented and expressed as Unity of God, of Religions and of Humanity, the phrase 'Revelation of Unity' cannot be found as such in the Writings. In fact, the idea of Unity is a prevalent topic of teaching and is described as one of the most important aspects of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Who calls *complete and enduring unity* the *distinguishing feature* (G 97) of His Revelation.

Neither is the inverse statement 'Unity of Revelation' as such expressed in the Bahá'í Writings. Yet, how "Unity" is understood in this dispensation is of importance, as Bahá'u'lláh has stated in a prayer: *"I entreat Thee, (...) to open the eyes of Thy people that they may recognize in this Revelation the manifestation of Thy transcendent unity."* (PM 307')

This paper investigates the question: What philosophical viewpoints are necessary to understand what Bahá'u'lláh calls *"Thy transcendent unity"* i.e., the concept of unity and oneness, which are ubiquitous in the Bahá'í Writings? The traditional understanding of the unity between the whole and its parts, as presented in philosophy, will be considered in the light of the Bahá'í Writings. The new vision of the 'Integral Whole' ("das integrale Ganze") will be used to better understand what the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh have revealed as the unity and oneness of the world. This new worldview is more than a political and social principle and needs to be considered as the heart of the *New World Order* (GWB 136) and of *The Most Sublime Vision* (ESW 54) of Bahá'u'lláh; therefore it is an ontological and metaphysical principle. Furthermore, this understanding relates to the new findings of quantum mechanics, which will be described in another paper as Entanglement and as a fundamentally holistic vision of the universe.

It can be said that this paper is written with the intention to

assist in the correlation of the Bahá'í Faith with current thoughts, as expressed in philosophy and science, following the advice of the Universal House of Justice:

Newly enrolled professionals and other experts provide a great resource for the development of Bahá'í scholarship. It is hoped that, as they attain a deeper grasp of the Teachings and their significance, they will be able to assist Bahá'í communities in correlating the beliefs of the Faith with the current thoughts and problems of the world. (SCH 13)

While it is quite obvious that to attempt such an endeavor today surpasses by far the capacity of any scholar, and while the understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation will take one millennium to be fully completed, this paper is a simple beginning to first raise the question, and then to try finding a provisional answer. In other words, this paper seeks to find the answer which is available today, but which will need to be revised over time as our understanding of the Revelation is relative and progressive according to the beloved Guardian. About the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, he said: *"Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."* (WOB 57) In pointing towards a change in philosophical thinking that has developed after the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, it is hoped that this beginning will open the way to better and more erudite responses in the future.

The new life of the seeker is described by Bahá'u'lláh, when He said:

*He will find himself endowed with a New Eye, a New Ear, a New Heart, and a New Mind.* (KI 195)

Therefore, this new understanding of *"Thy transcendent Unity"* requires in the seeker the endowment of a new eye, ear, heart and mind. It needs to be understood, right at the outset of this contribution to the 'Irfán Colloquia, that this *"Most Sublime Vision"* of Bahá'u'lláh can only be appreciated when the seeker – and that hopefully includes all of us – is *"endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart and a new mind."*

## Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Sublime Vision"

The question is: how can we approach this Vision of Bahá'u'lláh, which He himself described as being *"Most*

*Sublime*”? The word sublime, used by the beloved Guardian in his translation, has in English the following meanings: inspiring, inspirational, uplifting, awe-inspiring, moving, transcendent, and magnificent – all of which are fitting description of the new Vision of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

“Awe-inspiring” and “magnificent” indicates the relation of this vision to Bahá, i.e., ‘Glory,’ which is a key concept in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Who's name is translated as the “Glory of God” and it is part of the Most Holy Name of God, “*Allah-u-Abhá*,” translated as “God is the All-Glorious.” (KA 170)

“Inspirational,” “inspiring” and “moving” indicates the effect this Vision has on the seeker, the person who seeks to find God through Bahá'u'lláh. And the word “transcendent” indicates the total otherness and newness of this Vision. Bahá'u'lláh describes His Vision as ‘*most*’ sublime, announcing that this Vision has some likeness to these concepts, but is beyond all of the above mentioned attributes.

Describing the effect of this Vision, Bahá'u'lláh stated: “*Were the breezes of Revelation to seize thee, thou wouldst flee the world, and turn unto the Kingdom, and wouldst expend all thou possessest, that thou mayest draw nigh unto this sublime Vision.*” (ESW 56) This statement can well be compared to Christ's parable about the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:45-46): “*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.*”

It further must be kept in mind that the Vision of Bahá'u'lláh is the cause of the seeker's new ability to understand this very Vision. It moves, inspires, transcends and renews the seeker's capacities. That means that the course of action moving towards understanding this Vision is a circular and continuing process: we have to accept the Vision, and then we will be more and more endowed with the capacity to understand this Vision with our increasingly renewed ear, eye, heart and mind. In a previous paper this writer has described this process under the concept of progressive theology.

This process defies both deductive and inductive logic as we know it. Therefore, this process has to be first developed in this paper in order to understand its subject matter. Another equally important pre-consideration of a move towards this Most Sublime Vision is the fact mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh that our

life has to be more and more consonant with this Vision in order to be able to understand it.

“Purge your hearts from love of the world, and your tongues from calumny, and your limbs from whatsoever may withhold you from drawing nigh unto God, the Mighty, the All-Praised. Say: By the world is meant that which turneth you aside from Him Who is the Dawning-Place of Revelation, and inclineth you unto that which is unprofitable unto you. Verily, the thing that deterreth you, in this day, from God is worldliness in its essence. Eschew it, and approach the Most Sublime Vision, this shining and resplendent Seat.” (ESW 54)

The same was expressed by Bahá'u'lláh when He admonishes philosophers and scientists:

*For God doth not ask you of your sciences, but of your faith and of your conduct. Are ye greater in wisdom than the One Who brought you into being, Who fashioned the heavens and all that they contain, the earth and all that dwell upon it? Gracious God! True wisdom is His. All creation and its empire are His. He bestoweth His wisdom upon whomsoever He chooseth amongst men, and withholdeth it from whomsoever He desireth.* (SLH 234)

Furthermore, we have to understand that this Vision can only be perceived by the “*unstopped ear of the inmost heart.*” (SLH 86)

It is not accidental; it is rather significant and surprising that this new life of the seeker is here described in an unmistakable progression. First is the new ear, which will allow us to hear the Word of God; then the new eye is mentioned, because God's Manifestation can be seen in the whole world and in our own life after we have perceived the Word of God. The next step in this process is the new heart, which is the place where this Vision can become part of the seeker. The last step is the new mind, a mind that will finally be able to get the picture of this Sublime Vision, so this vision can become a world vision, a view of the world, or, we could say, a new “Weltanschauung.” The terms “*hearing of thine heart*” for the *New Ear* (GWB 217), “*eye of thine heart*” for the *New Eye* (KI 57), and “*understanding heart*” for the *New Mind* (GWB 35), are all expressions revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

The role of the heart in regards to this Vision is crucial and will be mentioned in another paper. It is just in the last 30 years that the role of the heart in the neurological aspect of the body

and mind is being researched and the findings are rather surprising. Even in a cursory view into this matter it is clear that the heart's function was not understood previously in the traditional medical neurology. When the human body is only seen as a mechanical system, the heart is just a pump. The long tradition to attribute to the heart so many more functions was totally ignored and never critically researched.

It needs to be stated right in the introduction that this paper attempts to see the world differently and in a new way. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has clearly stated that the Bahá'í Cause is a new beginning, and the newness encompasses everything that is to be discovered in the world. We have a *new age*, and we need to consider the *whole creation as being reborn*. For improved clarity, the following statement is broken down according to the topic described:

*Now the new age is here and creation is reborn...*

*Arts and industries have been reborn, there are new discoveries in science, and there are new inventions...*

*And all this newness hath its source in the fresh outpourings of wondrous grace and favour from the Lord of the Kingdom...*

*... until the old ways, the old concepts, are gone and forgotten, this world of being will find no peace (SWAB 253)*

What is most important about this statement, are these facts:

- This new age will lead to new discoveries in science, industry and in inventions.
- All this newness is caused by, and is an outpouring from, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.
- The peace of this world is dependent on a change of understanding of this new worldview and of forgetting the old understanding.

A new conceptualization of the physical world is also required by the discovery of quantum mechanics, as Einstein has said:

This discovery [i.e., the quantum theory] set science a new task: that of finding a new conceptual basis for all of physics.



This new age starts in the heart of the believer and is a renewal of the spirit and of the understanding of this world, as Bahá'u'lláh described it in the beginning of His Mission in the Seven Valleys:

*Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught, that he may enter the realm of the spirit, which is the City of God. (SVFV 7)*

This principle – that any change starts in the heart and from there will eventually renew the world – defines the structure of the New World Order as initiated by Bahá'u'lláh.

This paper is based on the vision that all that is new and valuable today, in science, art, technology and philosophy, is caused and originated by this Revelation. Consequently, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly stated it, we have to forget the old ways and old concepts, i.e., we have to reconsider our whole way of thinking and perceiving this world in order to bring this world to peace in the New World Order. While this paper attempts to follow this direction of the Master, it is obvious that this attempt is only a beginning, at best, in this pathway into a new age and new world.

## Revelation of Unity of God – Religion – World

In this chapter an important question about unity is raised: Is it the same or something different that is understood by the word “unity” in the two different contexts of God and of the world, of the Creator and of the creation? Usually, when we talk about unity or oneness, we uncritically take for granted that we all understand what that means, and that there is only one meaning to these words.

Consider that in the English language the word “unity,” compared with “oneness,” has a slightly different flavor. Both words are derived from the English word “one” or from the Latin word “unus,” which both have the same original meaning in their respective languages.

The definition of these two words in Webster's Dictionary is not the same. This fact is relevant to this paper and will be presented below.

### **ONENESS**

1. The quality or state or fact of being one

2. Uniqueness, Singleness  
Wholeness, Integrity  
Harmony, Concord  
Sameness, Identity (numerical), Unity, Union
3. Solitariness (archaic)

Unity, on the other hand, is defined more extensively.

### **UNITY**

1. The quality or state of being one or consisting of one,  
Oneness, Singleness
2. A condition of concordant harmony  
Continuity without deviation or change, absence of  
diversity
3. The quality or state of being made one, unification  
A combination of ordering of parts
4. The quality or state of constituting a whole  
The totality of related parts, a complex or systematic  
whole

(Other meanings are related to mathematics, art, drama, and to law, which we will not mention here.)

Obviously the definitions are overlapping, but the emphasis is different. Oneness is the more general and practical term, while unity is used in a more specific and technical sense, which is generally true for all duplicated words in the English language derived either from Anglo or Latin roots, for example liberty versus freedom. Additionally, Integration is only mentioned under oneness and Unification is mentioned only under unity. The relationship of the whole and the parts is only mentioned under Unity, and the meaning of this relationship is expressed under different subheadings. Furthermore, the word Unity (of Latin 'unus') has many more derivatives in the English language such as, Union, Unit, Unite, Unitarian, and other combined words such as Unification, Uniformity, Universe, Univocal, Unison, Universal, Unipotent, and many more.

In general we will use these two terms interchangeably, but it is important to keep the differences in mind. In the English translation of the Writings the word Unity is more frequently used, for example in the *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, officially translated by Shoghi Effendi, the word Unity is used five times more often than the word Oneness. We

have to ask if there are similar differences in the Persian or Arabic languages, or if the difference was made by the Guardian, translating the same words differently into English according to the context. It appears that there are more than two words in the original language; however Shoghi Effendi used the two English words, not in correspondence to the original text, but related to the context.

Contrary to the Bahá'í Writings, Webster excludes diversity from unity, and uses a similar word only as an entry for "unity in variety" as an aesthetic principle related to the fusion of various elements into an organic whole, which definition comes closest to the Bahá'í use of the phrase "unity in diversity."

There are two major reasons why we need to look at this word more closely. One is the social and political use of the concept of unity, which had vast and potentially devastating consequences as it was applied during history and especially during the last century. The different ways of understanding the word unity was propagated by different political movements in the past and is still used today. We have a spectrum of meanings, from uniformity and identity of parts to aggregation of unrelated parts, i.e. from totalitarian dictatorship to extreme and almost anarchic individualism. Later, in the philosophical section, this will be explored more deeply.

The other reason why this word is the topic of this paper is the fact that the Bahá'í Writings distinguish clearly between the word unity as it is used in the created world and the same word when it is applied to the Creator. Without going into details here, we can already conclude that any application of the word unity to God is false if it implies any relationship to numbers, to multiplicity or any separation of parts, or even any understanding of unity in the way as unity is understood in our physical world.

We have to consider first the different use of the word unity, as applied to God, to the Manifestations and to the world of humanity, as well as to all the religions of God. The separation of the different meanings of the word unity, or oneness, in relation to God has been clearly stated by Bahá'u'lláh when He said in a prayer:

*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 hath woven, and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted*

*above the vain imaginations which the hearts of men have devised.* (PM 123)

It follows from this verse that oneness or unity can be understood in different ways, depending if we talk about created oneness, or the Oneness of the Creator, of God. There are ways in which applying the concept of unity or oneness to God is nothing but a vain imagination of the human heart and an attempt to make God an object of human thinking and understanding; in other words, trying to make the unknowable essence of God knowable, thus creating an idol rather than knowing God.

On the other hand, when the word unity is applied to the Manifestations of God, we can follow the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

*Conceive accordingly the distinction, variation, and unity characteristic of the various Manifestations of holiness, that thou mayest comprehend the allusions made by the Creator of all names and attributes to the mysteries of distinction and unity, and discover the answer to thy question as to why that everlasting Beauty should have, at sundry times, called Himself by different names and titles.*  
... (GWB 22)

When considering the Manifestations we can legitimately talk about distinction, variation and unity characteristics. Here we have a unity that is the unification of variation and of distinctions, a unity that is the sign of creation. As a matter of fact, Bahá'u'lláh expresses this in a prayer:

*Thy unity is inscrutable, O my God, to all except them that have recognized Him Who is the Manifestation of Thy singleness and the Day-Spring of Thy oneness.* (PM 57)

It could be said that the Manifestations in their historical plurality are the manifestation of God's unity. They alone give access to the inscrutable unity of God to those that have recognized them. Clearly it is stated here that the unity of God is unknowable and can only be recognized in the unity of the Manifestations. Only when this unity is accepted, only when it is understood that all the Manifestations are one, can the unity of God be praised. This understanding is prefaced by the following words indicating the role "*of the spirit within the innermost chamber of thy heart*" in comprehending the Divine inscrutable unity:

*O brother! kindle with the oil of wisdom the lamp of the*

*spirit within the innermost chamber of thy heart, and guard it with the globe of understanding, that the breath of the infidel may extinguish not its flame nor dim its brightness. Thus have We illuminated the heavens of utterance with the splendours of the Sun of divine wisdom and understanding, that thy heart may find peace, that thou mayest be of those who, on the wings of certitude, have soared unto the heaven of the love of their Lord, the All-Merciful. (KI 61)*

The unity of God is frequently expressed in the Bahá'í Writings but must be understood in this very specific sense. It is being manifested in the unity of the Manifestations of God. It is not an abstract or philosophical concept that can be manipulated and compared with what can be called created unity. Created unity is always a unity in diversity, or a unity consisting of parts that need to be unified. This unity brings with it forever the philosophical and scientific conundrum: how the relationship of the whole and the parts can be logically described, and how the physical reality of this world is composed. In the philosophical section of this paper this issue will be further developed.

The unity of the world of humanity and the unity of all religions is another principle of the Bahá'í Faith. It is, one could say, the most important, most actual and the most emphasized principle of the Faith, for it undoubtedly is what the world needs most today. Bahá'u'lláh has expressed this need by directing us to the situation of our time, when He said:

*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements. (TU 1.4)*

It could here be developed how the understanding of the relationship between the whole and its parts affects not only the political and social structures of humanity, but the basic understanding of this world. One could say that the Christian theology in its Platonic or Neo-platonic interpretation emphasizes the unity and degrades the multiplicity of its parts. Consequently the spiritual is evaluated by devaluating the material.

This is the reason why the Aristotelian solution that gives the whole priority over the parts (form over matter), but considers both as equally real, was so well received in Christian theology since the time of Thomas Aquinas. This is actually a progress in

the right direction from the Neo-Platonic understanding that only the whole is real, and everything partial is derived from it as an emanation, an overflow, and therefore less real.

The opposite is happening in modern science and modern philosophy: the material, the parts, the aggregation of the elements of nature in causality are emphasized, and exclusively preferred, without consideration of the value of the whole, this way of thinking devaluates all spiritual aspects of life and deprives the world of enchantment, of value and meaning. As will be pointed out in another paper, this is changing since the findings of quantum mechanics are slowly influencing science.

It appears to this writer that the cosmology inherent in the Bahá'í Writings gives us a new and revolutionary way of seeing this relationship. Neither spirit nor matter is devaluated or negated. The unity of the world is deemed as equally valuable as the multiplicity and diversity of things material, and both are seen as elements of the Creation. A problem is only created if humanity finds one-sided attachment either to the spiritual, as in some forms of mysticism and in the attempts to reach God in His unity through meditation, or to the material, in the modern emphasis on physical reality in all materialistic and reductionistic systems of thinking. While this new way of thinking could be developed from the Bahá'í Writings in a thorough analysis of how they see the relationship between the one and the many, the spiritual and the material in all aspects of life, only some samples can be presented here.

The fact that Bahá'u'lláh states that prayer to God and service to mankind are equally valuable presupposes the fact that both the spiritual and the material are created by God and are basically good. Bahá'í spirituality, therefore, needs to be conceptualized on the idea of unity in diversity, and its practical development in the future cannot really be seen today. Shoghi Effendi's description of the future Bahá'í commonwealth is based on similar premises, as will be pointed out below.

What this unity of humanity is and how it should be achieved and protected in the future is a most important question of which the beloved Guardian has said:

World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving.

...The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world

commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. (WOB 202)

Describing this unity of the human race and this world commonwealth, Shoghi Effendi depicts many of its features and lays down the principles of its organization. However, he states that the actual structure and the functioning of this world unity cannot be visualized at this point:

Who can visualize the realms which the human spirit, vitalized by the outpouring light of Bahá'u'lláh, shining in the plenitude of its glory, will discover? (WOB 205)

## Unity of the Bahá'í Revelation

This is a principle of the Faith that is not stated as such in the Writings. It is, nevertheless a constituting principle without which the Faith cannot be conceived, and it further includes the unity of all Revelations of God throughout history, which is implied in unity of religion, and is expressed in the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation.

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, clearly pointed out the unity of all the Writings when he made the following statement about the *Will and Testament* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* of Bahá'u'lláh:

*A comparison of their contents with the rest of Bahá'í sacred Writings will similarly establish the conformity of whatever they contain with the spirit as well as the letter of the authenticated writings and sayings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.* (WOB 4)

This is an explicit statement about the unity of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and it is noted that this conformity is related to whatever the Writings contain, i.e., to all of the Writings, and it extends to the spirit as well as to the letter of the authenticated Writings of the Báb, of Bahá'u'lláh, and of His official interpreters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

John S. Hatcher in his book about the “Art of Bahá'u'lláh” approached this Revelation with the tools of literary criticism. He has adapted these tools to study the context and style of the “Ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Words”, stating:

The more intimate we become with the art of Bahá'u'lláh, the more we come to appreciate this context of the Revelation as having continuity and integrity. And the more we come to discover this overall unity to the Revelation, the more we appreciate that no single work can be fully studied apart from this context any more than a single passage can be analyzed out of the context of the work in which it appears.

The concept of progressive revelation expands this continuity of all Manifestations of God throughout history, disregarding their need to bring the Message in accordance to the understanding of their audiences and in consideration of the fact that their words have not always been transmitted to us in their original form.

The unity of the Revelation of the Báb, and of Bahá'u'lláh is rather remarkable, but can be seen only after a meditative involvement in the Writings. It is not a superficial unity; it is an integral and pervasive unity. Even though it includes the obvious and literal meaning, as well as any deeper and spiritual meaning, it also encompasses the different styles of the Writings as Bahá'u'lláh has stated:

*At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic, and yet Our supreme purpose and highest wish hath always been to disclose the glory and sublimity of this station. God, verily, is a sufficient witness. (ESW 14)*

## Tabernacle of Unity

Is there?	Praise of Creation	Pathways of Love	True of Thyself	Tabernacle of Unity
Prayer of the Báb (SWB 217)	Bahá'u'lláh (SVFV 2)	Bahá'u'lláh (SVFV 25)	Bahá'u'lláh (SVFV 27)	Bahá'u'lláh Tablet to Zoroastrians 5.1
Praise be God	First Fire Lit from Lamp of Preexistence and Singleness ("The fire Thou hast kindled in me")	Creature to True One	Inwardness (Spiritual)	Ascent Lightness, Heat (To the Spirit)
He is God	First Sun Risen in the Heaven of Eternity ("From this sun is generated, and unto it must return, the light which is shed over all	True One to True One	Firstness (Individual)	Motion (Active, Form)



	thing.”)			
All are His servants	First Morn Glowed from the Horizon of Oneness (“Thou didst illumine my outer being with the morning light of Thy favor”)	True One to Creature	Outwardness (Material)	Descent (From the Spirit)
All abide by His bidding	First Sea Branched from the Ocean of Divine Essence (“The water with which Thou hast created me”)	Creature to Creature	Lastness (Collective)	Stillness Weight, Density (Passive, Matter) Have come into being through the will of the Lord of all that has been and shall be.

Above is a sample of the unity of the Writings that can certainly be improved upon and changed, but it can give us some understanding of how all the concepts and thoughts, the literal and the spiritual meanings of the texts, can be seen in a unified vision and meditated together.

The first column of the picture is from a prayer of Báb, and it includes the last four statements of this prayer.

The second column is from the introduction of the Seven Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh. Other explanatory verses of Bahá'u'lláh have been added in parentheses to place these terms in context. The verses directly under the underlined concept are the explanation given in the original text.

The four Pathways of Love are again from the Seven Valleys and do not need much explanation; these verses originally inspired this writer to compare them with the prayer of the Báb, and this conformity was developed in an unpublished paper and in many presentations.

The next column is again from the Valley of Unity and is the topic of a paper by this writer, presented and published in the Lights of 'Irfán in 2005.

The final column is from a newly translated early Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh and again presents four concepts in harmony with the previous texts. Its importance is explained in the words following these four ideas, where it is said that they *“have come into being through the will of the Lord of all that has been and shall be.”*

In the picture below, the Tabernacle of Unity is organized in a different way, following the organization suggested by the Seven Valleys and as described in the paper *True of Thyself* by this writer. Some elements are omitted to make the picture less cluttered and the Bahá'í principles of Prayer, Service, Unity, and Order are added. The organizing elements are what Bahá'u'lláh calls the four stages of man when He wrote:

*And thus firstness and lastness, outwardness and inwardness are, in the sense referred to, true of thyself, that in these four states conferred upon thee thou shouldst comprehend the four divine states, and that the nightingale of thine heart on all the branches of the rosetree of existence, whether visible or concealed, should cry out: 'He is the first and the last, the Seen and the Hidden....' (SVFV 27)*

The harmony of the Writings is evident in this comparison. It is the *Most Sublime Vision* of Bahá'u'lláh. Its meaning becomes a proper subject of meditation and allows the believers to immerse themselves deeper into the Ocean of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The unity of the Bahá'í Faith, in itself and in its Writings, is not the whole story; it is rather the primary and present day example illuminating the history of humanity. According to the principle of progressive revelation and the unity of the Manifestations, which are especially developed in Bahá'u'lláh's early and most significant book, the *Kitáb-i-Sqán*, all Divine Manifestations throughout history and all of their Revelations constitute the Unity of God's Revelation throughout the history of humanity. Speaking about all of the Manifestations of God, Bahá'u'lláh says:

*... thou mayest behold them all as the bearers of one Name, the exponents of one Cause, the manifestations of one Self, and the revealers of one Truth, and that thou mayest apprehend the mystic "return" of the Words of God as unfolded by these utterances. (KI 159)*

They not only present the unity of God's Revelation throughout history, they all are the Revealers of one Truth, the Truth of God. This unity of all Manifestations and of the Truth of their Revelations was described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who indicated that this understanding is new and has not been mentioned before in any other Revelation:

*His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh has announced that the*

*foundation of all the religions of God is one; that oneness is truth and truth is oneness which does not admit of plurality. This teaching is new and specialized to this Manifestation. (BWF 246)*

That unity or oneness of truth belongs in the same vision as the unity of all Revelations is here expressed. Yet, according to some postmodern philosophers, there is no unity of truth, and truth is totally dependent on the subjective understanding of the individual expressing it, a concept totally alien to the Bahá'í Revelation.

Bahá'u'lláh clearly applied this truth to all Revelations and mentioned Jesus in this context saying:

*... Jesus, the Spirit of God, [and] His proclamation of the unity of God and of the truth of His Message! (GWB 57)*

This is a direct reference to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John (18:37-38)

*Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?*

We can easily understand the doubtful answer of Pilate, and many post-modernists and modern bible critics would agree with him. While the philosophical question of "what is truth" will not be developed here, it is important to indicate that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has a clear and expressed view of this issue and stands in the tradition of classical philosophy and its claim that human reason has the ability to recognize truth.

## **Unity of God in Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith**

In the following, a lengthy paragraph from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh will be presented because it brings the questions of what unity is and how it has to be understood in a new and surprising focus. We will first quote the whole section, and then discuss it sentence by sentence. Metaphysics and physics of consciousness can facilitate this understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation, if compared to the sacred Writings of the Faith.

He is a true believer in Divine unity who, far from confusing

duality with oneness, refuseth to allow any notion of multiplicity to becloud his conception of the singleness of God, who will regard the Divine Being as One Who, by His very nature, transcendeth the limitations of numbers.

The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same.

By this is meant that whatever pertaineth to the former, all His acts and doings, whatever He ordaineth or forbiddeth, should be considered, in all their aspects, and under all circumstances, and without any reservation, as identical with the Will of God Himself.

*This is the loftiest station to which a true believer in the unity of God can ever hope to attain. Blessed is the man that reacheth this station, and is of them that are steadfast in their belief. (GWB 165)*

The first paragraph clearly distinguishes the Divine unity from all created unity. Created unity cannot be conceived other than as a unity in multiplicity, a unity that forms a whole from the unification of parts, which parts than can be numbered. Therefore, any concept of unity consisting of numbers of parts and elements that form the unit cannot be attributed to the Divine unity. This understanding of unity excludes the Christian concept of the Trinity, as it is usually understood as three-in-one or one essence in three persons.

Even the so-called atom, which means the fundamental part of all matter that cannot be further divided (a-tomos means indivisible, not being able to be divided), has been divided in modern physics, and the last of its parts that are studied have been found, at least in quantum physics, as not being a-toms either, or indivisibles, but are perceived as elements that are on the border between wave and matter, one could say between a spiritual or physical entity, as some interpreters of these studies claim.

In the next paragraph Bahá'u'lláh states something surprising and unexpected. Talking about the essence of belief in Divine unity, He makes a statement that can be easily mis-understood in the sense of the Christian Trinitarian theology, especially if the paragraph before and after this sentence is not understood, and some crucial words are overlooked.

*The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same. (GWB 165)*

Let's imagine that this sentence would have been presented in the Council of Nicaea, in 325, where the Trinity Theology was developed, and let's further replace the Manifestation of God with Jesus Christ, who certainly is a Manifestation in the Bahá'í understanding. So the sentence would look like this in this adapted and shortened form:

*The essence of belief in Divine unity consists in regarding Him, Jesus Christ, and the Divine Essence as one and the same.*

We deliberately left out the fact that Bahá'u'lláh describes the Divine essence as inaccessible and unknowable. Certainly, the followers of Athanasius would have agreed, one and the same is their catchword: "homo-ousios" (of the same substance or essence). The followers of Arius would have protested. "Not the same," they would have screamed, "only of similar substance, homoi-ousious." (I am aware that these two words were actually coined later as the battle cry of these two camps.)

The emperor, who according to Eusebius, entered the council in his golden splendor, would have agreed as well, even though he later followed the Arian interpretation. We must consider that the emperor got baptized only later on his death bed and that the bishops were probably dressed in simple garments, some of them still carrying the marks of previous persecutions. The council had been called by the emperor, and he allowed the bishops to travel at the government expenses. The bishop of Rome, too old to travel, sent two priests as his representation to this council, which was mainly attended by bishops of the Eastern Roman Empire.

What we left out - the description of the essence of God as being inaccessible and unknowable - and the next sentence of Bahá'u'lláh, if it would have been presented in Nicaea, would probably not have been understood at all at that time. The bishops might have quoted John 6:60 "*Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?*"

Bahá'u'lláh continued to say:

*By this is meant that whatever pertaineth to the former, all*

*His acts and doings, whatever He ordaineth or forbiddeth, should be considered, in all their aspects, and under all circumstances, and without any reservation, as identical with the Will of God Himself. (GWB 165)*

What must be considered is the fact that this sentence does not limit the previous statement but puts it in the right perspective. The context of understanding of this statement is the fact that God is unknowable. So, any sameness or identity between a creature and God can only be in what is knowable and pertains to God, i.e., His Word, or His Will and Command, or, in other words, the Revelations of His Manifestations.

The distinction between unknowable and unknown is usually not taken very seriously. In the Acts (17:23) Paul is reported to talk about an unknown God:

*For, as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.*

At the time of Paul, the idea of a god or gods was a well known and an accepted fact to people in general; only a specific god could have been unknown in Greece. Paul does not raise the question if God can be known; that was not a question that could have been asked at that time, because in the common sense everyone knew about the gods. It is a question of importance today, where atheism and agnosticism is widespread, and was the public policy in a third of the human population not long ago. It took several centuries to develop this question. At about the 6th century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, following the Neo-Platonic tradition, developed the “via negative” and affirmed the fact that we know nothing about God. Karen Armstrong calls this an attempt to combine the Semitic and the Greek conception of God.

We may ask: what is unknowable today, where science and technology opened so many ways of knowing things? The only thing that is unknowable in this world is the “personal” and the “subjective” and even science cannot make it known objectively. The crucial issue is human consciousness, the fundament of human personality. We do not know what goes on in anybody’s mind, unless they talk to us. As a matter of fact, even neurobiological studies can only tell us that *there is something going on*, but not *what is going on*. Even our knowledge of our own mind is limited by our ability to reflect.

Psychology, with all its tests and clinical evaluations, has to recognize the fact that there is always a substantial part of the person which is unknowable. That's why the therapeutic process is based on honesty and honest communication with each other, honesty with oneself and honesty of the patient, a virtue the patient has to learn in the process of therapy. That was clearly expressed by the psychoanalyst Loewald's description of therapy:

Our object, being what it is, is the other in ourselves and ourselves in the other. To discover truth about the patient is always discovering it with him and for him as well as for ourselves and about ourselves. And it is discovering truth between each other, as the truth of human beings is revealed in their interrelatedness.

This is the psychoanalytic description of what the dialogical-personal thinkers called personal versus substantial knowledge. Ferdinand Ebner has formulated this truth in the following way:

What exists as personality, can never and in no way be conceived as existing in the way of a substance. If we make the concept of substance the basis of the understanding of reality, then we lock out forever any way to recognize that, which exists in the way of personality. To a being of a personality we can only have a 'personal' relation, in the final analysis no other relation as the relation of the 'I' to the 'Thou.' To a substance we can in no way have a personal relation – therefore in our relation to it the 'I' disappears in a sense.

Concluding, it can be stated that God is unknowable in any substantial, scientific and objective way. What we know about God is what He has revealed to us through His Manifestations, so it is an eminently personal knowledge that is expressed in praise and prayer, not in any knowing of what God is. Therefore, the sameness between God and His Manifestation is not an essential one of "ousia" or substance, as the Council of Nicaea understood it, but a personal one. It is based on the Revelation of God's Will or Word in His Commands, as Bahá'u'lláh so clearly describes this oneness as related to the acts of the Manifestations with the Will of God:

*By this is meant that whatever pertaineth to the former, all His acts and doings, whatever He ordaineth or forbiddeth, should be considered, in all their aspects, and under all circumstances, and without any reservation, as identical*

*with the Will of God Himself.* (GWB 165)

The mistake, and at that time any other solution might have been even more wrong than the Nicaean Creed, was not in the identification of sameness between God and His Manifestation, but in placing the sameness into the substance, the hypostasis, or the “ousia”, or essence of God.

This is still true about Catholic Theology today. Karl Rahner, making a statement in his Theological Dictionary about the Hypostatic Union (as the explanation for the concept of the Trinity is traditionally called), said:

This formulation is the fruit of the great Christological controversies of the first four centuries. These arose of intellectual speculations which unsuccessfully attempted to elucidate the fact, evident in Scripture, that Jesus Christ is true man and true God. ... (p. 218-219)

It is remarkable that even Rahner calls it no less than an intellectual speculation and an unsuccessful attempt. From the point of view of the Bahá'í Revelation it has become clear that this speculation probably was unavoidable, but it could not be successful, because it attempted to understand intellectually what is unknowable and inaccessible, i.e., the essence or substance ('ousia') or nature of God.

That this intellectual speculation has to be unsuccessful, that the nature of God cannot be conceived or described, was stated by Bahá'u'lláh when He revealed in a prayer:

*Every praise which any tongue or pen can recount, every imagination which any heart can devise, is debarred from the station which Thy most exalted Pen hath ordained, how much more must it fall short of the heights which Thou hast Thyself immensely exalted above the conception and the description of any creature.* (PM 194)

Islam has totally rejected the concept of Trinity and accused Christians of believing in more than one God, accusing them of Tritheism, a heresy in Christian theology which never reached importance in theology, even though some practices of Christians today are not far away from this way of thinking. For example, there are medieval pictures, which depict God with three heads on one body. This way of depicting the Trinity was condemned by the church as clearly wrong,

What is rather interesting is the fact that in Islam the person



of Muhammad, the Prophet, does not reach the same veneration than Christians give to Jesus. This means that in the Muslim faith it is the Book that attracts the special attention; it is the Qur'an, which has come from heaven through the Prophet. In Christianity, the Book, the Bible, is secondary to Jesus; it tells us about Him, and that is its importance. The emphasis on the human station of Mohammad, the Prophet, can be understood as a reaction to the understanding of Christ's Divinity, as it is expressed in the concept of the Trinity.

In the Bahá'í Faith these two aspects are combined and corrected. Jesus and Muhammad are placed in the same position as all the other Manifestations of God, and the holy Books are equally seen as testimonies of the Revelation of God. It is the person of the Manifestation, as well as His Revelation and His Writings that are the testimony to the truth.

In the Most Holy Book, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (p. 134), Bahá'u'lláh has combined these two traditions in calling the Manifestation the "Living Book," contrasted it with the written Book of His Revelation (the Báb, in His Writings, has used this concept of living book before):

*Take heed lest ye be prevented by aught that hath been recorded in the Book from hearkening unto this, the Living Book.* (KA 66)

Another verse of Bahá'u'lláh specifically explains how the testimony of the truth of this Revelation is established in the Person of the Manifestation, in His Revelation, and in the resulting Book of His Writings, and how this can be recognized by every soul:

*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 proof of His reality and truth. This is, verily, an evidence of His tender mercy unto men. He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God.* (GWB 105-106)

The solution to this age old problem of the Oneness of God, that has caused discord and strife, war and hate between the followers of these two Revelations of God, is the fact explained in the above quoted verse of Bahá'u'lláh, that the essence, the substance, the nature or 'ousia' of God is unknowable and inaccessible. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has formulated this truth revealed by

Bahá'u'lláh, when He said:

*But, that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man. Never shall that immemorial Reality lodge within the compass of a contingent being. His is another realm, and of that realm no understanding can be won. No access can be gained thereto; all entry is forbidden there. The utmost one can say is that Its existence can be proved, but the conditions of Its existence are unknown. (SWAB 54)*

Bahá'u'lláh describes this complicated issue by affirming that the Manifestation can say “*I am God*,” just like the Christian believes that Jesus is God. Because all of what we know about God derives from the life and Revelation of His Manifestation, Christians and Muslims can say about their Prophet that He is a “*Messenger of God*,” and Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that this is only possible when the human aspect of the Prophet is seen in its “*utmost state of servitude*”:

*Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: ‘I am God!’ He verily speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto. For it hath been repeatedly demonstrated that through their Revelation, their attributes and names, the Revelation of God, His name and His attributes, are made manifest in the world. ...*

*And were any of them to voice the utterance: ‘I am the Messenger of God,’ He also speaketh the truth, the indubitable truth. ...*

*And were they to say: ‘We are the servants of God,’ this also is a manifest and indisputable fact. For they have been made manifest in the utmost state of servitude, a servitude the like of which no man can possibly attain. (KI 178)*

This is nothing more than an explication of the statement of Christ in the Gospel of John (10:30) “*I and my Father are one.*” And later (John 10:37-38) “*If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.*”

To close this excursion into Christian dogma, it appears that at the time of early Christianity the concept of an unknowable God was unconceivable, since everyone was believed to know God. It was a time when the statues of many different gods

covered the sanctuaries of the land, and the whole world was conceived as functioning in dependency to these gods. The Jewish belief in one God only, was tolerated by the Romans as peculiar and as a historical tribal idiosyncrasy. On the other hand, the same belief was conceived so aberrant in non-Jews that Christians who shared that belief were called atheists by the Romans. To them, belief in only one God was nothing other than un-belief, a-theism. Christians were persecuted on the Emperor's mandate for such beliefs and put to death for it.

How could people raised in this environment conceive of an unknowable God, Who is only known through His Manifestation? So, they had to describe the relationship between Christ and God in their own way, inventing the concept of the Trinity and attributing the same essence, substance, or 'ousia', to both Christ and God the Father. This was a logical and possible unavoidable conclusion taken at the Council of Nicaea and then carried forth into 2,000 years of Christian Theology.

Today, after the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, we can understand that the mistake of their solution was the fact that it is totally incorrect and impossible to talk about essence, substance, nature or 'ousia' of God; God is absolutely unknowable in any such way.

Even today, even among the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, who came from a Christian background, it is quite likely that this issue is not clear, and our understanding of God is not yet what it should be in keeping with the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. We have not consequently followed through with the idea that we do not know and cannot know God in any substantial and objective way, that we cannot even talk about God in this way, or talk about the essence, the substance or 'ousia' of God.

On the other hand, we are exhorted, invited and even obligated to know God and love Him, not in a scientific and objective way, but in a personal approach. God has spoken through the Word of the Manifestations to us, and has allowed us to speak back and praise Him through prayer and service

The following Verse from a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh can best be understood in the same way

*Here am I with my body between Thy hands, and my spirit before Thy face. (PM 243)*

As in Genesis 2:7

*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*

God *formed* the body of Adam, so Bahá'u'lláh talks about the material body between God's forming hands. The living soul was given to Adam through the breath of God, which breath comes from the face in the picturesque language of the first book of the bible, hence the many allusions to the face or countenance of God as a indication of the spiritual aspect of man. Here clearly the difference between the material and the spiritual of man is described. Without exaggeration we can say that the consequences of this understanding will certainly change the whole structure and meaning of religion in the future.

Concluding the previous two chapters the following can be stated: The difference in the concept of unity between the Creator and the creation is important and has to be understood in the way this unity is manifested in the Prophets of God. It is not their nature or essence; it is their Word, their Revelation, and their Message which manifests the unity of God. That means that the unity of God can only be seen in the unity of the Manifestations with each other and in the unity of their individual Revelations, which is the Word of God and originates in the Will of God. Any other understanding of the unity of God is vain imagination, as Bahá'u'lláh stated in the prayer mentioned before.

Consequently, the unknowability of God could be described in this way: The essence of God is unknowable, so all that can be known about God is what He makes known of Himself. What God makes known to humankind is called Revelation, and it is known to humanity through God's Messengers, through His Manifestations, or biblically through His Word, which was incarnated in Christ.

In other words, nothing can be known about God except what was revealed through His Manifestations. Secondly, God reveals Himself in His creation, which is the place where God makes Himself known through His Manifestations in another form, as all that was created was created through His Manifestation, through His word, as it is said in John 1:1-3 *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."*

There are three ways of knowing God: through the life of the Manifestation, through the Revelation of the Manifestation, and through the world as being created by the Manifestation. It needs to be remembered that humanity is part of creation, and therefore the knowledge of God is innate to humans as well.

These three ways of knowing God are described by Bahá'u'lláh:

All knowledge of God comes

1. through the Manifestation, through His life, described as the "*Living Book*"

*Say: God, the True One, is My witness that neither the Scriptures of the world, nor all the books and writings in existence, shall, in this Day, avail you aught without this, the Living Book, Who proclaimeth in the midmost heart of creation: 'Verily, there is none other God but Me, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.'* (KA 81)

2. and through their Revelation, their written Book:

*The source of all learning is the knowledge of God, exalted be His Glory, and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation.* (TB 156)

3. and all knowledge of God is evident in His creation, because *all things were made by* the Manifestation:

*From that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God. So potent and universal is this revelation, that it hath encompassed all things visible and invisible.* (GWB 178)

## Overview of a Philosophy of Integral Unity

In a very cursory form we will present the history of the unity concept in philosophy by mentioning the major philosophers and indicating their understanding. Certainly, this topic could be the subject of an extensive monograph, but here only a very short overview of the most important authors will be presented, assuming that the details are known.

B. R. Kadem has described the "Origin of the Bahá'í Concept of Unity and Causality, A Brief Survey of Greek, Neo-Platonic,

and Islamic Underpinnings” and has pointed out the distinctive features of the Bahá’í account. One of the most important differences is the assertion that the unity concept is attributed to the Manifestation of God, not to God Himself as in the Neo-Platonic and Islamic tradition. Therefore he states

The Bahá’í concept of the unity of being is laden with implications unprecedented in the Greek, Neo-Platonic, or Islamic forbears. The understanding of these implications are therefore now part of the current and future labors of thought for Bahá’í thinkers. (p. 115)

He further states that there is a need to re-think the Neo-Platonic concept of emanation, when used in the Bahá’í context. In this paper the concept of Revelation of Unity is carried further into the present scientific and philosophical thinking, and only the following very brief reference is made to the historical aspect of this question.

### **Pre-Socratic Philosophers: Monism versus Pluralism**

Parmenides (and in similar way much later Spinoza, and in some ways Hegel): One Reality, Monism. His understanding pervades all of European philosophy, from Plato to the Neo-Platonists, and into the Christian Philosophy by Origin and others, especially in the tractate of the Trinity by Augustine. It further implies an emphasis on unity (spirituality) and distrust for plurality (materiality).

Democritus (and in similar ways modern science): Atomism. The whole is the sum of its parts, a mechanical, accidental and material universe. Any concept derived from the whole and not the parts is without value and can be neglected; all phenomena can be reduced to their “atoms,” and truth can only be found in this reductionistic way of thinking.

### **Classical Greek Philosophy**

Plato: The reality is in the idea; any multiplicity is only a shadow of reality. Neo-Platonism has developed this further and was critical in influencing Christian theology towards the depreciation of the reality of this world

Aristotle: Unity (or Form) and Plurality (Primal matter). Reality is the unity of form and matter that explains movement and change; Aristotle developed his meta-physic after studies in physics (nature). This understanding was renewed by Thomas Aquinas and became the centerpiece of scholastic philosophy. It

is taught in Catholic Universities even today, making Christian philosophy more realistic and directed towards the reality of this world. As a matter of fact, this more realistic understanding was one of the causes of the development of modern sciences.

### Modern Philosophy: Idealism versus Materialism

Hegel: Idealism, Unity of Ideals, of the Spiritual, Dialectical process of these ideas verified in the social arena of the ideal Prussian State

Marx: Materialism, Economic evolution of World Unity to be brought about by violent revolution, and cumulating in the dictatorship of the proletariat, even though it is predicted to happen with iron necessity. (Before and after Marx, Feuerbach, Darwin and Freud can be counted in the same group.)

The different ways unity and multiplicity were understood is a theme with many variations throughout the history of philosophy. It seems to have come to a harmonious solution only recently, after the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and not without the influence of this Revelation, as was noted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the above mentioned quote:

*And all this newness hath its source in the fresh outpourings of wondrous grace and favour from the Lord of the Kingdom.* (SWAB 253)

What is the newness in the philosophy of today that relates to the one and the many, to unity and diversity? In a previous paper of this writer, the history of this vision of the "Integral opposition of Unity and Plurality" ("Der integrale Gegensatz von Einheit und Vielheit") was briefly described, and the relevant authors were mentioned. Here the thoughts of Augustinus Karl Wucherer-Huldenfeld, as described before, will be more extensively presented as they are important to better understand the concept of unity in the Bahá'í Writings.

The Integral Whole is described by Wucherer-Huldenfeld in the following points:

- The Whole relates to the parts integrating or complementing them in a structure of a real synthesis
- The parts, in their internal unity and diversity, are equally original and essential, constituting equally the respective whole, which they build with each other and for each other

- The greatest unity of the whole is realized with the greatest independence and freedom of its diverse parts or elements
- In the whole the parts are “healed” and integrated; through the parts the whole is “healed,” it is made whole
- A dialectic of different conceptions of Unity & Plurality can be developed: Totalitarian dissolution of Plurality versus Radical Plurality (Postmodern Pluralism)
- From an article on Teilhard de Chardin: Unification differentiates; the more unity the more complexity is possible; unity of spirit and matter: Spirit-Matter

The drastic change and the newness of this thought are not obvious, unless we consider the social and political application of it. That is really the topic of Shoghi Effendi's considerations about the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, even though it is not expressed in philosophical statements in his writings. The Guardian does clearly state that all previous social and political forms of political unity are obsolete and that a new form will be developed in the Bahá'í Commonwealth:

“The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded.” (WOB 203)

In this brief formulation, which is more extensively described in the Guardian's communication to the American Bahá'ís, it is remarkable that the unity of all nations, races and creeds is combined with a complete safeguard of the autonomy of the individual states as well as with the promotion of the personal freedom and initiative of all individuals.

What is crucial in the Guardian's understanding of unity in diversity is the fact that in this understanding the parts reach their advantage from the whole and the whole has to guarantee the welfare of the parts.

*The advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no abiding benefit can be conferred upon the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are ignored or neglected. (WOB 198)*



Seen from the side of the parts Shoghi Effendi states that any distress to the parts affects the whole; they are mutually dependent, that is, they constitute each other mutually. Neither is prior, neither is more or less than the other.

*The welfare of the part means the welfare of the whole, and the distress of the part brings distress to the whole. (PDC 122)*

Philosophically this conception is only possible in the above proposed understanding of the unity of the integral whole. It is remarkable to note that this philosophical thought was only fully developed after the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, even though it happened in a tradition that prepared for this development.

There are many statements in the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith that envision a similar unity, where the parts are equally protected, cherished and found to be essential to the unity, especially the many comparisons of 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the unity of the world and mankind with a flower garden. Here some examples how the diversity and variety of a garden adorns its beauty and increases its perfection.

*How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. (SWA 291-292)*

The importance of variety in oneness is emphasized in this sample from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings:

*When there is variety in the world of oneness, they will appear and be displayed in the most perfect glory, beauty, exaltation and perfection. (TH 14)*

'Abdu'l-Bahá's beauty in the diversity of the garden expresses the new understanding of the relationship between the one and the many, the whole and the parts. It is described as a gift of God and the felicity of the human world in another statement:

*Therefore, the part is expressive of the whole, for this seed was a part of the tree, but therein potentially was the whole tree.*

*So each one of us may become expressive or representative of all the bounties of life to mankind.*

*This is the unity of the world of humanity. This is the bestowal of God. This is the felicity of the human world, and this is the manifestation of the divine favor. (PUP 16)*

The importance of what Shoghi Effendi called the “watchword” of the Bahá’í Faith, “unity in diversity,” can hardly be overestimated. Is it not the basis of any future political, sociological and philosophical development which the Bahá’í Writings predict, and is it not the need of our age? This is expressed by Bahá’u’lláh in these words:

*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.*

In the Bahá’í Faith the spiritual is not evaluated by devaluating the material; both are valued and equal in their own right. Neither is unity extolled at the cost of diversity and multiplicity. That means that any devaluation of any aspect of God’s creation is wrong and alien to this Faith.

A basic difference to previous dispensations, like Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and others, is the value given to the world as God’s creation. This value judgment is not placed on the ontological structure of the world, but on the choices humans make in dealing with the creation. Any overestimation of one aspect over the other is wrong. When the material, the multiple, and the diverse is overestimated, we have materialism and a station of man that is lower than the animal. On the other hand unity – or the spiritual – should not be overestimated either to the detriment of the diversity and the material. Bahá’u’lláh made this clear in the rejection of asceticism and monasticism and of certain forms of mysticism.

Bahá’í Unity is understood as *unity and diversity, as variation and oneness*, as oneness in multiplicity, which is characteristic for this created world, and neither can be evaluated by devaluating the other, neither can be affirmed by negating the other, yet both are transcended by the *inner meaning of the Word of God*, as it is stated by Bahá’u’lláh

*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.* (KI 160)

Bahá'í spirituality, therefore, needs to be conceptualized on the idea of unity in diversity, and the consequences of this new approach cannot be fully understood today, neither can the practical applications in the future be seen in our present world. Shoghi Effendi's description of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh is the most that can be said today about this future development. And yet, it can easily be understood that this new vision will bring a revolutionary change to all religions in the future, affecting theology, philosophy and the practical life of all the followers of the world religions. Summarizing we can make the following conclusions.

- God's Unity is transcendent, beyond unity and multiplicity, transcending numbers and comprehension, i.e., unknowable.
- God's Unity is revealed only through the Unity of the Manifestations, their words and laws, expressing God's Primal Will and Word
- Created unity is always "unity in diversity", "oneness in multiplicity"
- Created unity is constituted by the integration of the whole and the parts, which are equal and both original; they are the "*same and different*" (TB 140)
- The concept of integral unity, or unity in diversity, has implications for the future, and its practical application in the future Bahá'í commonwealth was described by Shoghi Effendi as far as this is possible today.

# Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings

## Part One

Ian Kluge

### 1. Introduction

Postmodernism is a general name given to an extraordinarily influential intellectual and artistic movement which in its philosophical form, originated in France – though its foundations are largely in the work of German philosophers such as Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger<sup>1</sup> – and successfully took root and flourished in North American intellectual culture. Over the last forty years, postmodernism's influence has been felt in a wide variety of subjects; however this paper will focus on its philosophic aspects and leave aside its manifestations in art, photography, theatre, architecture and creative literature. Wherever postmodernism has appeared, the depth and breadth of postmodernism's impact is astounding. Some subjects, such as literary studies, have been radically transformed by the encounter to the point where 'theory' to swamp the subject of literature itself. Philosophy has felt its very legitimacy and usefulness as a subject challenged<sup>2</sup> not to mention basic concepts such as knowledge, rationality and truth as well as the whole notion of metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> History has been touched by, among other things, the struggle over the whole notion of grand narratives versus small or local narratives,<sup>4</sup> the knowability of the past, as well as the uses of history.<sup>5</sup> Women's Studies, though not in themselves part of postmodernism, have been affected by the entire deconstructionist project, by postmodernism's analysis of power relations and, more controversially, by its antipathy to essentialism. Psychology feels the influence of postmodern thinking in its handling of gender and political science in discussions of marginalization and the workings of power.<sup>6</sup> Cultural Studies have opened new vistas for exploration through the study of simulations and simulacra.<sup>7</sup> Postmodernism has also re-shaped and revised Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>8</sup>

The breadth and depth of postmodern philosophy's influence makes it necessary to examine the nature of its relationship to the Bahá'í Writings in order to assess whether or not there are points of agreement, their extent, and whether or not they are superficial or fundamental.

The movement is so important and, in many respects, so radical that thought systems and/or religions cannot avoid taking a position in regards to its ideas. Such is the project undertaken by this paper which will examine the major philosophical issues covered by postmodern philosophy in epistemology and the quest for knowledge especially in literature, philosophy, history and cultural studies; in ontology; in philosophical anthropology (theory of man) and in ethics. This paper shall compare and contrast the positions taken by major postmodern philosophers with those that are given directly or implicitly in the Bahá'í Writings.

This inevitably leads to the question 'Can a Bahá'í adhere to some form of philosophical postmodernist without losing intellectual consistency, and if so, in what way?' This paper concludes that the Bahá'í Writings and postmodernism share a variety of ideas but on fundamental issues of ontology, epistemology, philosophical anthropology (theory of man), ethics and cultural theory, they are incompatible. Generally speaking, postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings do not share the same or even a similar "Denkweg,"<sup>9</sup> or way of thinking. This is not to say there are no similarities between the two but that the similarities are relatively superficial or accidental whereas the differences are deep and foundational.

The plan of this paper is simple: in Part I, we shall survey the major postmodern writers - in particular Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Rorty and Baudrillard who are "the major philosophical figures in the post modern turn in philosophy."<sup>10</sup> In Part II, we shall compare what these philosophers say with the Bahá'í Writings.

## **2. The Nature of Philosophical Postmodernism**

In its broadest sense, philosophical postmodernism is a movement that challenges the most fundamental premises that have guided the development of Western philosophy since the time of Plato, and most particularly, the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment. Indeed, this theme of opposition to the Enlightenment is so strong, some scholars see postmodernism as a continuation of the "Counter-

Enlightenment”<sup>11</sup> that began in Germany and France in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and found its most influential voice in Nietzsche. The Counter-Enlightenment opposed the Enlightenment’s proclamation of the autonomy of reason and the methods of the natural sciences based on observation as the sole reliable method of knowledge and the consequent rejection of the authority of revelation, sacred writings and their accepted interpreters tradition, prescription and every form of nonrational and transcendent sources of knowledge ...<sup>12</sup>

Thus we can see that the central feature of the “Counter-Enlightenment” was to question and undermine the supremacy of reason and empiricism in the quest for knowledge and to make room for intuition and instinct, which we deemed to be more natural and spiritual. This feature is clearly evident in the following characterization of postmodernism distinguished by

an anti-(or post) epistemological standpoint; anti-essentialism; anti-foundationalism; opposition to transcendental arguments and transcendental standpoints; rejection of the picture of knowledge as accurate representation; rejection of truth as correspondence to reality; rejection of the very idea of canonical descriptions’ rejection of final vocabularies, i.e. rejection of principles, distinctions, and descriptions that are thought to be unconditionally binding for all times, persons, and places; and a suspicion of grand narratives, metanarratives of the sort perhaps best illustrated by dialectical materialism.<sup>13</sup>

The specific meaning of this statement will become more clear as we proceed through this paper. Postmodernism also notably rejects the concept of reason, the rational subject, the idea of progress, “epistemic certainty”<sup>14</sup> and ‘truth,’ and all manner of binary oppositions such as good and evil, nature and culture, true and false and perhaps most surprisingly, writing and speech.<sup>15</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, two of the best known scholars on postmodernism write, that in addition to rejecting representation, i.e. the belief that theories reflect reality, it also

Rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory; abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented

subject.<sup>16</sup>

Many (though not all) of these attributes can be encapsulated by saying that postmodernism rejects the 18<sup>th</sup> Century European Enlightenment and its intellectual culture of seeking certain truth and “clear and distinct comprehension”<sup>17</sup> that could not be doubted. This goal received its most powerful early formulation in the work of Descartes whose famous method led him to reject anything which could possibly be doubted.<sup>18</sup> In the last analysis, he discovers, what cannot be doubted is his own existence – to doubt it, he must exist! – and the power of reason to deliver the truth if we reason correctly.<sup>19</sup> Thus he established on a firm philosophical basis, the primacy of the subject in the quest for knowledge and the primacy of reason. These ideas became foundational to Enlightenment, i.e. ‘modernist’ thinking which built on them and applied them to the exploration of reality.

One of the most comprehensive summaries of Enlightenment thought is presented by Jane Flax. Despite its length, it is worth quoting in full.

1. The existence of a stable, coherent self. Distinctive properties of this Enlightenment Self include a form of reason capable of privileged insight into its own processes and the “laws of nature.
2. Reason and its “science” – philosophy – can provide objective, reliable, and universal foundation for knowledge.
3. The knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be “true” – for example, such knowledge will represent something real and unchanging (universal) about our minds and the structure of the natural world.
4. Reason itself has transcendental and universal qualities. It exists independently of the self’s contingent existence (e.g., bodily, historical and social experiences do not affect reason’s structure or its capacity to produce atemporal knowledge).
5. There are complex connections between reason, autonomy, and freedom. All claims to truth and rightful authority are to be submitted to the tribunal of reason. Freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason. (The rules that are right for me as a rational being will necessarily be

right for all other such rational beings.) In obeying such laws, I am obeying my own best transhistorical part (reason) and hence am exercising my own autonomy and ratifying my existence as a free being. In such acts, I escape a determined or merely contingent existence.

6. By grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge and power can be overcome. Truth can serve power without distortion; in turn by utilizing knowledge in the service of power, both freedom and progress will be assured. Knowledge can be both neutral (e.g. grounded in universal reason, not particular "interests") and also socially beneficial.
7. Science, as the exemplar of right use of reason, is also the paradigm of all true knowledge. Science is neutral in its methods and contents but socially beneficial in its results. Through its process of discovery we can utilize the laws of nature for the benefit of society. However, in order for science to progress, scientists must be free to follow the rules of reason rather than pander to the interests arising from outside rational discourse.
8. Language is in some sense transparent. Just as the right use of reason can result in knowledge that represents the real, so, too, language is merely the medium in and through which such representation occurs. There is a correspondence between word and thing (as between a correct truth claim and the real). Objects are not linguistically (or socially) constructed; they are merely made present to consciousness by naming and the right use of language.<sup>20</sup>

Directly or indirectly, Flax's summary touches on almost all of the Enlightenment beliefs against which the postmodernists rebelled in their various ways, thereby revealing the "deep irrationalism at the heart of postmodernism"<sup>21</sup> This opposition to the Enlightenment is also why postmodern philosophy is so heavily indebted to Nietzsche and Heidegger, who were both scathing critics of Enlightenment thought.

What postmodernism primarily offers in return for these wide-ranging rejections is more room for heterogeneity, for difference and the different, for the marginalized, for the colonized, the silenced and the outcast, be they subversive ideas or interpretations hidden in a text, a social class or group, the conquered, dominated, suppressed, rejected and demeaned. It



also offers a new way to experience ourselves as subjects and a new way of relating to reality which is regarded as a man-made social construction. Finally, it offers freedom from being enslaved to metanarratives or “grand narratives”<sup>22</sup> which threaten the independence and freedom of our lives. Thus, we can see that postmodernism is, or sees itself, as an intellectual liberation movement working for the freedom of oppressed peoples and ideas. It is, therefore, at least to some extent involved in the politics of knowledge, which means it formulates theories with an eye to their usefulness and suitability for its liberationist goals. It is not simply trying to find truth but truth that makes free.

This oppositional attribute of postmodernism has been observed by such scholars as Lloyd Spencer whose article bears the telling title of “Postmodernism, Modernity and the Tradition of Dissent”. Spencer writes, “postmodernism can be seen as an extension of the critical, sceptical, dissenting – even nihilistic – impulse of modernity.”<sup>23</sup> This oppositional nature fits in well with postmodernism’s liberationist agenda.

To the charge that this reduces it from a philosophy with a disinterested quest for truth, to an ideology which seeks truth that are useful to a particular end, the postmodern reply is that whether conscious of it or not, all philosophy is ideology and is working in the interests of someone or some group. A disinterested quest for truth is a fiction to deceive others and ourselves.

### 3. The Foundations of Postmodernism: Kant

Whereas Descartes may be seen as the initiator of the Enlightenment or modernism in philosophy, Kant (1724 – 1804) is generally regarded as its towering philosophical intellect. However, Kant’s role is ambiguous, because he may also be understood as also having laid the basis for postmodernism. Without question, Kant gave primacy to reason in the quest for knowledge; indeed, rationality is our most important attribute as human beings.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, Kant put limitations on reason, restricting its effective scope to the phenomenal world of our daily experience. “I shall show that neither on the one path, the empirical, nor on the other, the transcendental, can reason achieve anything, and that it stretches its wings in vain, if it tries to soar beyond the world of sense by the mere power of speculation.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, he rejects the belief that God, Who is obviously transcendental to

this phenomenal world, can be proved cosmologically, i.e. from the contingent existence of phenomenal reality, we cannot deduce the existence of a necessary and non-contingent being.<sup>26</sup> The final result of Kant's view is that human reason and knowledge are confined to the phenomenal world; there is no possibility of reasoning or obtaining knowledge about whatever is transcendental.

According to Kant, the limitations of reason were also demonstrated by the antinomies, that is, the equally possible but rationally contradictory results which show "discord and confusion produced by the conflict of the laws (antinomy) of pure reason."<sup>27</sup> In other words, on some subjects – the limitation of the universe in space and time; the concept of a whole cosmos made of indivisible atoms; the problem of freedom and causality; the existence of a necessarily existing being – reason can come to opposite but equally rational conclusions. There is simply no way to break the deadlock. Thus, "reason makes us both believers and doubters at once"<sup>28</sup> leaving us with grounds to believe and disbelieve in God and in reason itself.

Kant's third contribution to the development of the postmodern outlook is the theory of categories. In Kant's view, our perceptions of the world did not arrive in the form in which we actually experience them. Rather they arrive as 'raw data' which the mind processes and shapes by means of the categories which are the conditions on which having an experience depends. "These categories therefore are also fundamental concepts by which we think objects in general for the phenomena, and have therefore *a priori* objective validity"<sup>29</sup> These categories, which include organizing raw data according to time, space, causality, necessity, contingency, subsistence and accident among other things, constitute, that is, create our experience of the phenomenal world. Thus, our mind shapes the raw data of our perceptions into a coherent world which becomes the object of our experience. In Kant's view, we have no way of knowing what the raw data was like before it was shaped into the phenomenal world by the categories of the mind; that noumenal realm must remain forever beyond our grasp and there is no point in speculating about this terra incognita. It is also follows clearly from Kant's views, that to one extent or another, the perceiving subject cannot be taken as a mirror reflecting a pre-existing reality, which is to say, the subject cannot access reality and deliver accurate reports about it. Indeed, the subject is "an obstacle to cognition"<sup>30</sup> and cannot

be trusted.

Kant's views laid the foundations for postmodern constructivism, which asserts that our knowledge of reality, be it natural, social or personal is constructed, not discovered. Discovery is really construction as Kant's theory of the data organizing categories makes clear. We make the world or reality we experience. As we shall see later, in postmodern theory, the function of the categories is taken over by language and culture. This means that there can be no objective knowledge or representation of reality and that all we have are various constructions or stories none of which is privileged over others in terms of its truth value. (How, after all, could truth be determined if we only have constructions and nothing to compare our constructions against.?) Not only is external reality hidden beneath our constructions, so is our individual self or identity which becomes just another construction or story among the rest. This is a profoundly different way of experiencing oneself than the belief in an immortal soul forming our essence. Indeed, in this view, things such as cats, stars, species or individuals do not naturally have essences; rather these so-called essences are constructed for our convenience by selecting, more or less arbitrarily, a certain number and/or kind of traits. Postmodernism as we shall see drew the obvious lesson from Kant's view: if reality, the world, and the self can be constructed in one way, they can also be constructed in another. The world and reality may be changed by reconstructing it along new lines.

Kant also influenced postmodern thought by providing an idea to react against, namely, the sharp division between the perceiving (and organizing) subject and the object, the data being organized. (Hegel, among others, already sought to overcome this division in his philosophy) The postmodernists want to see the subject and object as one di-polar complex, as a self-in-the-world, as irrevocably embedded in a specific life-situation with its unique perspective. Self and world are like two sides of a coin, distinct but not separable from one another.

Kant's influence may also be felt in another area important to postmodern thinking, namely, its rejection of metaphysical investigation or speculation. According to Kant, it is impossible for us to gain knowledge about anything that is not part of the phenomenal world constituted by our mental categories. In other words, we cannot know anything that is not organised in accordance with the categories of time, space, causality,

necessity, subsistence and accident among other things. The nature of the raw data or reality – the noumenon – before it is perceived and shaped by the categories is forever unknowable. Human knowledge is limited to the phenomenal realm, i.e. that which is shaped by the categories. For this reason, cosmological proofs of God are impossible: they attempt to reason from the nature of phenomena to the nature of an entity – God – Who is beyond the phenomenal. We cannot apply reason – based on our understanding of the phenomenal world shaped by the categories – to that which has not been shaped by the categories. Consequently, all metaphysical speculation about non-phenomenal reality is pointless.

Finally, Allan Megill points out another area in which Kant's philosophy, perhaps inadvertently, influenced postmodern thought, namely aesthetics. If nature, in Kant's view, was the realm of law and our actions were the realm of the good (we always try and achieve what appears as a good to us) then aesthetics may be seen as a realm of freedom from these constraints, a realm in which beauty, pleasure and satisfaction are the goals. Kant, was read as asserting that there was "an autonomous realm of the aesthetic"<sup>31</sup> In other words, there is a realm where man is free to construct however he chooses, where man is completely free. Moreover,

Kant's insistence on the autonomy of aesthetic judgment leads him to deny that art has 'truth value ... At the same time, however, some of his statements in the *Critique of Judgment* can be read as contradicting this view. For he does hint that while art cannot supply us with knowledge in any logical sense, it can put us into contact with something that cannot be fully presented in experience or grasped through concepts.<sup>32</sup>

The lesson to be drawn from this is that only through art and through art-making or constructing can humankind ever attain its full measure of freedom and learn whatever 'truth' it is able to learn. Art, the aesthetic, has become the model and ideal of existence.

#### 4. The Foundations of Postmodernism: Nietzsche

Frederich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) had such an enormous influence on postmodern thought that one might well consider him to be the first postmodernist. According to Best and Kellner, Nietzsche's "assault on Western rationalism profoundly influenced Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard and other postmodern theorists."<sup>33</sup> According to Clayton Koelb,

"Nietzsche initiated many of the basic concepts which stand behind the broad concept of postmodernism."<sup>34</sup>

Many, if not all, postmodern themes are taken up in his various works, from the early *The Birth of Tragedy* to his final, posthumously collected notes in *The Will to Power*. Of these, the distrust, indeed, dislike, for reason is clearly evident in one of his earliest and most widely read works, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche relentlessly criticizes modern culture and its (for him) archetypal character, Socrates.

Our whole modern world is entangled in the net of Alexandrian culture. It proposes as its ideal the *theoretical man* equipped with the greatest forces of knowledge, and laboring in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates.<sup>35</sup>

The "theoretical man" was Socrates, the champion of reason and thought as the best means of discovering the truth about ourselves and reality. In a similar vein, he writes in *Twilight of the Idols*:

Today, conversely, precisely insofar as the prejudice of reason forces us to posit unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, thinghood, being, we see ourselves somehow caught in error, necessitated into error<sup>36</sup>

Socrates, the "theoretical man" has fallen prey to a profound *illusion*... [an] unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of logic, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct and leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into *art: which is really the aim of this mechanism*.<sup>37</sup>

Nietzsche calls Socrates a "mystagogue of science"<sup>38</sup> with whom originated "the spirit of science... the faith in the explicability of nature and in knowledge as a panacea."<sup>39</sup> Despite claims to be seeking the truth, the mission of science is really to comfort humankind by making existence appear comprehensible and thus justified; and if reasons do not suffice, *myth* had to come to their aid in the end—myth which I have just called the necessary consequence, indeed the purpose, of science<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, the mission of science – and the quest for knowledge in general – is to provide comforting illusions such as the notion that the universe is an orderly place and/or a place

we can understand. To do this, science has “first spread a common net of thought [“myth”] over the whole globe, actually holding out the prospect of the lawfulness of an entire solar system.”<sup>41</sup> However, Nietzsche is not hopeful that this strategy will be successful: “But science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly towards its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck.”<sup>42</sup>

These passages explicitly and implicitly point to other Nietzschean themes in addition to scepticism about knowledge and science, logic and reason. For example, Nietzsche's scepticism about truth is plainly evident when he says, “Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value of life is ultimately decisive.”<sup>43</sup> What is essential about truth is not that it is true but that it serves life: “[t]he criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, truth is not which is actually the case but that which meets our needs in the struggles of life – a view of truth that is highly subjective and which allows there to be as many truths as there are individuals with needs. When we think in existential terms, such might indeed be the case – we all have our own personal truths – but it is difficult to see how this could meaningfully apply to mathematics, medicine, science or history. Elsewhere he says that truth is “Inertia; that hypothesis which gives rise to contentment; smallest expenditure of spiritual force.”<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, he writes, “The biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge,”<sup>46</sup> thereby expressing his doubts about the existence of knowledge, something he had already done in *The Birth of Tragedy* by calling science a myth.

Nietzsche also strikes several postmodern notes when he writes:

Will to truth is a *making* firm, a *making* true and durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. “Truth” is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth as a process in infinitum, and active determining – not a becoming conscious of something that is itself firm and determined. It is a word for the “will to power”.<sup>47</sup>

Nietzsche tells us that the “will to truth” is seen in acts of will, in “making” things “true and durable;” it is an “active

determining.” Thus he identifies the “will to truth” with the “will to power,” which implicitly rejects the notion that truth is simply our discovery of what is the case. Indeed, he it clear that truth is something we make, or create by an act of will, and that this willing process goes on forever. Final truth is, in the last analysis, unattainable. It is also a product of human creativity:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.<sup>48</sup>

Truth, we might say, is an artistic human creation, a convenient fiction.

This position has at least six consequences that bore fruit among postmodern thinkers. First, if truth is man-made, then humankind has no access to reality, only its own fabrications – a theme we already saw in Kant’s division between the accessible phenomenal world and the inaccessible noumenal realm. This aesthetic theory of knowledge rules out any form of the correspondence theory of truth. Second, we observe the clear identification of the “will to truth” and the “will to power.” If these two are the same, then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that any claim to possessing truth is also a claim to power, i.e. those who claim to have truth are really advancing power claims over others. Third, truth is subjective insofar as it reflects what we need and desire, and what we project or impose on ‘reality.’ It is obvious, of course, that in this situation it is difficult to speak of reality at all, since there can be no one thing to which that term refers. Fourth, since truths are artistic creations – “are illusions” – there is no objective external standard by which to judge among truth claims and we can embrace them all as equally true or reject them all as equally false. In other words, this view exemplifies a thorough-going relativism (if we accept them all as somehow true) and scepticism (if we reject them all as doubtful.) Fifth, is the aesthetizing of reality, i.e. presenting it as a work of art, an idea that will later bear fruit with postmodern thinkers treating the world like a text or, as in Baudrillard’s case, quite literally as an artistic work. Sixth, the Nietzschean concept of truth as an artistic creation makes it

clear that the concept of an 'objective', disinterested quest for or contemplation of the truth is "conceptual nonsense."<sup>49</sup> Because the quest for knowledge is a manifestation of the will to power, all truth is 'interested' truth, i.e. truth with an agenda.<sup>50</sup> This is also true because all truth is perspectival: "The only seeing we have is seeing from a perspective; the only knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective,"<sup>51</sup> a position sometimes referred to as perspectivism.

According to Nietzsche's perspectivism, all statements of any kind represent only one particular and limited perspective embedded in the concrete realities of a specific human existence which has no more legitimate claim to being true than any other. There is no neutral, 'Archimedean point' from which reality can be 'objectively observed.' Speaking of philosophers, Nietzsche writes,

Every one of them pretends that he has discovered and reached his opinions through the self-development of cold, pure, divinely untroubled dialectic ... whereas at bottom a pre-conceived dogma, an "institution" or mostly a heart's desire made abstract and refined is defended by them with arguments sought after the fact. hey are all lawyers ... and for the most part quite sly defenders of their prejudices which they christen "truths" ...<sup>52</sup>

The unbiased, objective quest for truth as such is a willow-the-wisp; every claim to know truth is an expression of personal interest, of the will-to-power. This claim has obvious logical problem with self-reference: since it applies to Nietzsche's view as well, any universal truth value of his statement dissolves itself – and we find ourselves trapped in the midst of an infinite number of competing perspectives. Postmodernist philosophers, however, have simply brushed this problem aside and adopted Nietzsche's perspectivism.

From this we can naturally draw the conclusion that what we call 'truth' is only an interpretation; indeed, Nietzsche says, "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing."<sup>53</sup> Nor do things have an essential nature apart from our constructions and interpretations.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the following quote may be used to sum up Nietzsche's prevailing attitude and beliefs: "There exists neither "spirit," nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use."<sup>55</sup>



To the suggestion that truth is more valuable than lies or fictions no matter how convenient they are, Nietzsche answers: "It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than semblance"<sup>56</sup> and then asks, "Why couldn't the world *which matters to us* be a fiction?"<sup>57</sup> Why not, indeed, since "the will to know [is based on] the foundation of a much more forceful will, namely the will to not-know, to uncertainty, to untruth!"<sup>58</sup> Humankind wants – needs – its deceptions, and therefore one should not struggle too much for truth since "it stupefies, bestializes and brutalizes you."<sup>59</sup> The 'truth-game' is not worth the candle:

The world with which you are concerned is false, i.e. it is not a fact but a fable and 'approximation on the basis of a meagre sum of observations.; it is "in flux," as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for – there is no "truth."<sup>60</sup>

Obviously, therefore, no eternal or absolute truths exist, and that being the case, no so-called truths can serve as the foundations of any system of metaphysics, ethics, philosophical systems or, what postmodernism refers to as "grand narratives."<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche's rejection of truth is matched by his equally firm rejection of God. Zarathustra tells his listeners, "God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will. Could you create a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods."<sup>62</sup> In other words, Zarathustra-Nietzsche rejects transcendence, i.e. anything that is beyond the powers of the human will to create just as Kant rejects anything beyond the power of the human mind to know. Rather than wasting time with God, Zarathustra advises people to turn their energies into overcoming their humanity, and thus making way for the greater-than-man, the "overman" or superman" as he is sometimes called: "But you could well create the overman."<sup>63</sup> Later, Zarathustra says that "man is something that must be overcome – that man is a bridge and no end."<sup>64</sup> We should try to surpass our humanity and become something greater, or, if we cannot, at least help clear the way for something greater. In postmodernism this idea resurfaces as the theme of the 'death of man,' which plays an especially important role in the work of Michel Foucault.

## 5. The Foundations of Postmodernism: Heidegger

Though he is a highly controversial figure because of his one-time open support of the Nazi party, Martin Heidegger (1900 –

1976), perhaps the pre-eminent, most quoted philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is second only to Nietzsche in terms of influence on postmodern thought. Heidegger influenced postmodernism in six main ways. First, he rejects the metaphysics of the entire western philosophical tradition with the exception Anaximander, one of the pre-Socratics. The western tradition's metaphysics and the resulting subject/object epistemology leads to a utilitarian-scientific-technological world view that impoverishes our lives. Second, he rejects calculative, utilitarian view of reason as the sole source of legitimate knowledge and the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. Therefore, the concept of 'truth' cannot be limited to rationalized propositions about beings but must include knowledge of the Being of beings. Third, he sees truth as *aletheia*, the disclosure of the Being of beings; truth is not discovered by us but rather discloses or reveals itself. He also recognises the fundamental ambiguity of all knowledge. Fourth, he dismisses the notion of absolute final truth. Fifth, he doubts the ability of verbal propositions to mirror or reflect reality. Sixth, he sees the task of art and especially poetry as the disclosure of the Being of beings. Finally, in Heidegger's view, language is not a transparent medium and helps constitute our being-in-the-world and our life-world.

For reasons uniquely his own, Heidegger, like Kant and Nietzsche seeks to avoid or rather, "overcome"<sup>65</sup> metaphysics whereby he reinforces the anti-metaphysical trend already evident in 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy. Postmodern philosophy as we shall see is a part of this trend. Metaphysics – defined as "the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution and structure of reality,"<sup>66</sup> – has, according to Heidegger, gone askew since the time of Anaximander and continuously "misconstrues being"<sup>67</sup> insofar as it forgets the "question of Being"<sup>68</sup> and replaces it with concern for particular *beings*. Thus, Being, which is everywhere manifested in all things, and which transcends all things, is falsely described as "the most universal and the emptiest of concepts"<sup>69</sup> and is ignored; it ceases to be a subject of investigation in itself. No western philosopher since Plato has sought to describe the nature of Being as such. Instead, Being is replaced by interest in individual beings.

Metaphysics does indeed represent beings in their being, and so it also thinks the being of beings. *But it does not think being as such, does not think the difference between being and beings*<sup>70</sup>.

Being and beings are confused with one another. Elsewhere, Heidegger says, Metaphysics, insofar as it always represents only beings as beings, does not recall Being itself. Philosophy does not concentrate on its ground.<sup>71</sup>

According to Heidegger, this failure to deal with the Being of beings, leads to metaphysics and science both of which depend on a diminished understanding of truth: "To metaphysics the nature of truth always appears only in derivative form of the truth of propositions. which formulate our knowledge."<sup>72</sup> In short, we know a lot about things and stuff but have forgotten Being itself.

To illustrate what he means, Heidegger compares Being to color and to the Earth in statements that recall Wordsworth's passionate assertion,

Our meddling intellect

Mishaps the beauteous forms of things;

- We murder to dissect.<sup>73</sup>

In a similar vein, Heidegger writes,

Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyse it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. it causes every merely calculating importunity to turn to a destruction ... The earth appears only cleared and as itself when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable ....<sup>74</sup>

Our propositional knowledge and calculative or technological reason tell us nothing about color as it makes itself present ("presences" as a verb in Heidegger's language) to us, just as our knowledge of earth-science and technology cannot makes us aware of the Being of the Earth. Technology concerns itself not with the Being of things but "the imposition of man's will upon the world,"<sup>75</sup> upon individual beings. It does not care if it really knows a thing with which it co-dwells in the world but only that it achieves mastery and dominion over it To know the Being of the thing, we must open ourselves to its Being just as we need to open ourselves to the experience of color. In effect, we need what Wordsworth calls "a heart/ That watches and receives."<sup>76</sup>

Heidegger's analysis and the conclusions he draws from it

have deeply influenced postmodern (and ecological) philosophy. Immediately noticeable is that rational and scientific knowledge (measurement) are limited in what they can tell us and do not exhaust what can be known about a particular being. They are merely one kind of knowledge from one particular perspective, one interpretation about a thing and not knowledge per se; it is quite possible for other thinkers or cultures with different perspectives to have developed different kinds of equally valid knowledge of specific beings. Therefore it is impossible to claim that any one kind of knowledge of beings is privileged or has priority over any other. No propositional knowledge is absolute; it is all relative. As Heidegger says, "There is no absolute truth across the incommensurable understandings of being or world-disclosures."<sup>77</sup>

This, inevitably, brings us to the question of the meaning of 'truth'. According to Heidegger, the usual definition of truth involves the idea of something or a state of affairs being "actual,"<sup>78</sup> of being "the correspondence of knowledge to the matter,"<sup>79</sup> or the correspondence of something "with the 'rational' concept of its essence."<sup>80</sup> However, he disagrees with this view: "Thus truth has by no means the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the Object)."<sup>81</sup> In taking this position, Heidegger implicitly throws into question the subject/object distinction and relationship that has been the bedrock of western epistemology. If truth is not a correspondence between subject and object of perception, what could it be? In Heidegger's view, the correspondence theory of truth is also inadequate because it ignores our relationship to Being, the interpretation or understanding of which influences our self-understanding as human and thus our relationship to the specific beings we encounter. Our usual propositions about specific beings are made as though they were products of an intellect that is independent of any relation to and interpretation of Being.<sup>82</sup>

This, of course is false because conscious of it or not, all beings have a relationship to Being. For this reason, "the traditional assignment of truth exclusively to statements as the sole essential locus of truth falls away. Truth does not originally reside in the proposition."<sup>83</sup> It is important to note that truth does not arise "*originally*" in propositions, i.e. that there is a deeper, more primordial original truth which manifests itself in specific beings. Thus Heidegger does not think propositional truth is fully adequate to reality.

Furthermore, he also has doubts about the possibility of a meaningful relation between propositions and things, which is to say, he doubts that mere verbal propositions lacking proper grounding in a relationship to Being can ever satisfactorily correspond to real specific beings. In *Being and Time*, he asks, "In what way is this relation [of correspondence] possible as a relation between *intellectus* [mind/intellect] and *res* [thing/object]?"<sup>84</sup> From this question,

it becomes plain that to clarify the structure of a truth it is not enough simply to presuppose this relational totality [of complete correspondence between mind and object] but we must go back and *inquire into the context of Being which provides the support for this totality as such.*<sup>85</sup>

These passages also point out that our awareness of and attitude towards Being i.e. our "comportment"<sup>86</sup> towards Being influences our self-understanding as human beings which in turn influences our relationship to specific beings. We, may for example, ignore Being, and ourselves as a place where Being reveals itself, and see ourselves strictly as things whose existence is limited to the superficial daily aspects being – purely utilitarian considerations, getting, spending, dominating and being dominated – and, as a consequence, develop a purely calculative rational approach towards ourselves and the things of this world. We may reduce things in our surroundings to mere objects for use or domination, a fate from which artists and especially poets must rescue them.<sup>87</sup> Such objectifying leads to the dominance of technology in our lives and relationship to others and nature. Furthermore, Heidegger suggests that reason is not independent of other factors in our lives which is to say, is not transcendent i.e. objective or uninfluenced by our lives and therefore cannot provide a transcending and universal overview of reality that is uniform for all human viewpoints. "[A]ll truth is relative to Dasein's [man's] Being."<sup>88</sup>

According to Heidegger, truth is more than the mere propositions of calculative reason or a correspondence between a subject and object: truth, in the primary sense, is *aletheia*, unconcealing or "disclosedness"<sup>89</sup> of Being and the Being of beings, of letting Being be, of having, as Wordsworth says, "a heart/ That watches and receives." Thus, for Heidegger, existential truth is prior to propositional truth which implies that the disclosure of Being depends on our comportment or demeanour towards Being and the Being of beings including ourselves. The willingness to let Being be, to let the Being of things unconceal itself to us is man's original way of knowing

and only later does he 'fall' into forgetfulness of Being to satisfy himself with superficial, calculative, utilitarian reason and metaphysical propositions.

However, there is a fundamental ambiguity to *aletheia* for every unconcealing is also a concealing of Being and the Being of beings. "The disclosure of beings as such is simultaneously and intrinsically the concealing of being as a whole"<sup>90</sup> because

[i]n the simultaneity of disclosure and concealing errancy holds sway. Errancy and the concealing of what is concealed belong to the primordial essence of truth.<sup>91</sup> Thus, Being is always simultaneously disclosed and undisclosed, because these two conditions, like truth and untruth are not distinct absolutes but are correlates.

Precisely because letting be always lets beings be in a particular comportment [mood,

stance, attitude] which relates to them and thus discloses them, it conceals beings as a whole.<sup>92</sup>

Because truth is always the truth of a particular being with a particular comportment to Being as well as existing in a particular situation, the whole of Being can never disclose itself to us at any one time. Our availability to Being is always partial, and therefore, the unconcealing of Being is also a concealing. We are always faced with a 'hidden dimension' in our encounters with all beings. Because of this, our knowledge of the Being of things is unlimited; indeed, it is infinite, and for that reason there can be no limit to our knowledge of the Being of beings. This idea bore particular fruit in the work of Derrida, whose deconstructionism posited that no one approach to or reading of a text could possibly disclose the entirety of its meaning. There was undisclosed discord between what was revealed and what was concealed and this discord enable virtually an endless number of readings just as artists and poets could disclose endless aspects of the Being of beings. A final disclosure or reading is an impossibility.

In Heidegger's view, the arts, above all poetry and painting disclose the Being of beings; the artist "speaks ... in a nonsubjective, Being-attuned voice."<sup>93</sup> Art, has a deep epistemological function, it "puts us in touch ... with a truth that we cannot attain otherwise than through art."<sup>94</sup>

The Greeks called the unconcealedness of beings *aletheia*. We say "truth" and think little enough in using this word.

If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work .. Some particular entity ... comes in the work to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the artist rather than the scientist is in a unique position to lead us to the truth of Being. S/he is the one who can “get men to think about the involvement of Being in human nature.”<sup>96</sup>

However, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the poet has primary status for Heidegger because of the role that language plays in constituting man (Dasein): “discourse is constitutive for Dasein’s existence”<sup>97</sup> Language is not just a clear medium for representing things or ideas. Rather,

[l]anguage is a totality of words - a totality in which discourse has a ‘worldly’ Being of its own; and as an entity within-the-world, this totality thus becomes something which we may come across ready-to-hand.<sup>98</sup>

Because language is encountered like other beings in the world, it has a “‘worldly’ Being of its own”, it can act on us and shape i.e. ‘constitute’ our existence in a variety of ways. Fulfilling this function makes it impossible that language is merely representational of things or ideas, which in turn means that language, as a medium with a character of its own, cannot point us to any transcendental, absolute truths somehow apart from this world. Here we can already observe the first rejection of what postmodernists call “representationalism.” Failure to appreciate this aspect of language leads to a “metaphysics of presence” i.e. the belief that through the clear medium of language we can attain and perceive the presence of things as they really are.

## 6. Jean-Francois Lyotard

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924 - 1998), one of the premier philosophers of the postmodern movement, is best known for his book *The Postmodern Condition* which first brought the term ‘postmodern’ into common usage. This book, containing in seminal form most of the later developments of his thought, provides one of the most frequently quoted definitions of postmodernism: “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>99</sup> By “metanarratives,” (also called “grand

narrative[s]"<sup>100</sup>), Lyotard means those 'stories' or intellectual frameworks by which we interpret the world and our activities and thereby provide meaning for the whole and give certain data the status of being facts, truths or real knowledge. For example, Marxism supplied revolutionaries around the world with a metanarrative encompassing the behavior of matter i.e. dialectical materialism, as well as the nature, direction and future outcome of human history, i.e. historical materialism. The Enlightenment metanarrative concerned the gradual triumph of reason over irrationality and the progress of humankind not only in scientific knowledge but also in the progress towards rational freedom and a tolerant society. The Christian metanarrative tells the story of humankind's fall from grace and its redemption by Christ Whose word must be spread throughout the world.

All of these metanarratives offer a complete or total vision by which all possible human action may be interpreted and/or judged and for this reason Lyotard describes them as a "project of totalization."<sup>101</sup> The connotation of 'totalitarian' is fully intended by Lyotard who even describes metanarratives as "terrorist"<sup>102</sup> because they can be used to "eliminate[] or threaten[] to eliminate, a player [point of view, culture] from the language game one shares with them."<sup>103</sup> From another perspective we might say that one of the tasks of a metanarrative is the "legitimation of knowledge,"<sup>104</sup> which is to say that the metanarrative provides the foundational principles by which to distinguish 'real knowledge' from error, folklore, myth or the babblings of the insane. Thus, the metanarrative becomes the gatekeeper of knowledge – and, by extension, the guardian of crucial binary oppositions necessary for a system of thought or social system to maintain itself. Examples of such binary oppositions are order / disorder; sane / insane; noumenal / phenomenal; true / untrue; competent / incompetent; knowledge / superstition; rational / irrational and primitive / civilized. By means of these oppositions, metanarratives take on a prescriptive function not only for individuals but for entire societies who must conduct themselves personally and/or collectively to its standards which are enforced not just by institutions but by all those who accept the metanarrative. Lyotard (like Foucault) of course believes this prescriptive function imprisons us and the "incredulity toward metanarratives"<sup>105</sup> is a means of freeing ourselves from their rule. For Lyotard, this means freeing ourselves from modernity which "is identified with modern reason, Enlightenment, totalizing thought and philosophies of history."<sup>106</sup> Lyotard



“rejects notions of universalist and foundational theory as well as claims that one method or set of concepts has privileged status.”<sup>107</sup>

In *The Post Modern Condition* Lyotard also explains his views in terms of “language games”<sup>108</sup> i.e. systems of discourse or utterance working on the basis of certain rules that “are the objects of a contract, explicit or not, between the players.”<sup>109</sup> Without these rules (which may have been inherited) there is no game. In the language game every utterance is a “move.”<sup>110</sup> Each metanarrative, each culture and subculture plays its own language game; indeed, “language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist”<sup>111</sup> – a statement indicating that societies and language games are absolute correlatives. Concepts and statements only have meaning within the context of a particular game and each game must “privilege certain classes of statements ... whose predominance characterizes the discourse of the particular institution.”<sup>112</sup> The postmodern “incredulity towards metanarrative” in favour of the “little narrative [petit récit]”<sup>113</sup> i.e. the limited narrative without universal claims or implications, leads inevitably to the fragmentation of language games and the elimination of metanarratives. In the words of critic and philosopher Terry Eagleton, “Postmodernism, then, is wary of History but enthusiastic on the whole about history.”<sup>114</sup>

Lyotard takes particular aim at the metanarrative of science which he portrays as one language game among others without any special or privileged status in the quest for knowledge: “[t]he game of science is ... put on par with the others.”<sup>115</sup> In his view, both science and “non-scientific (narrative) knowledge”<sup>116</sup> i.e. rationality and narrative operate on the basis of different rules, and what is a good “move” in one game is not necessarily “good” in the other. Consequently

[i]t is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge. On the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different. All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species ...<sup>117</sup>

Elsewhere he says, “science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating other language games”<sup>118</sup>; indeed, it cannot even legitimate itself since like any other language game it cannot demonstrate the truth of its own ground rules which are simply “the object of consensus.”<sup>119</sup> The rules are accepted not because they are true but because we happen to agree on them. Very

clearly, Lyotard does not privilege rationality in the quest for knowledge.

## 7. Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004) is the originator of deconstructionism, perhaps the most influential version of postmodernist philosophy developed so far. According to Jonathan Culler, one of deconstruction's foremost expositors

To deconstruct a discourse [text] is to show how it *undermines the philosophy it asserts*, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise.<sup>120</sup>

In other words, in some way, every text undermines or subverts itself and thus destabilises any attempt to find in it a final, fixed, permanent meaning. It is important to note that this subversion occurs from within. As Derrida says,

The movements of deconstruction *do not destroy structures from the outside*. They are not possible and effective nor can they take accurate aim except by inhabiting those structures ... Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure ...<sup>121</sup>

The text subverts or works against itself through its choice of words and phrases, the ambiguity of some words and phrases, rhetorical devices and/or imagery. Perhaps the best known example of this procedure is "*Plato's Pharmacy*," in which Derrida explores Plato's "*Phaedrus*":

The word *pharmakon* [remedy] is caught in a chain of significations. The play of that chain seems systematic. But the system here is not, simply, that of the intentions of an author who goes by the name of Plato.<sup>122</sup>

However, as Derrida points out, *pharmakon* means not only 'remedy' but also 'poison' not to mention 'spell' or 'drug' (as in hallucinogen) and this "chain of significations" serves to destabilise any simplistic interpretation of the text. Writing, which Thoth had introduced as a remedy for humankind's poor memory, is also a 'poison' that weakens memory, and may cast a 'spell' over us by making us think we have understood an idea when we have not.

If the pharmakon is “ambivalent,” it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (body/soul, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc)... The pharmakon is the movement, the locus and the play: (the production of) difference.<sup>123</sup>

Each reading of ‘pharmacy’ evokes another, often contrary meaning; we recognize the difference between ‘remedy’ and ‘poison’ and in choosing one, even if only for a moment, we ‘defer’ the other meanings which, despite being deferred, help complete our understanding of the text. These other meanings are referred to as ‘supplements,’ (Derrida who is very inventive in coining new terms for his concepts and often has several terms for identical concepts.) This process of recognizing difference and deferring Derrida calls “*différance*” (note the spelling) and in his view every text is an endless play of ‘*différance*’ as we defer, or temporarily push into the background, the meanings of various words. Each of these deferred meanings helps complete the full meaning of a word and for that reason, “The play of the supplement is indefinite.”<sup>124</sup> Derrida makes the same point by stating that “writing structurally carries within itself (counts-discounts) the process of its own erasure and annulation...”<sup>125</sup> By “erasure” Derrida does not mean that one meaning of a word is absolutely excluded but rather that we read a word with awareness of all its other potential meanings instead of privileging one, usually conventional, meaning over all the others. We read the word with all of its meanings, aware of the ambiguity this causes in our understanding of the text itself.

To the objection that such supplementation is simply an arbitrary and extraneous addition to what is clearly the author’s intention, Derrida replies

Certain forces of association unite – at diverse distances, with different strengths and according to disparate paths – the words “actually present” in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system whether or not they appears as “words ...”<sup>126</sup>

This claim is based on Derrida’s belief – derived from Saussure – that meanings of words are not given by “transcendental”, i.e. extra-linguistic reference to the outside world but only by their relationship to other words. The

signifier does not receive its meaning from the external or 'transcendental' signified; there is no longer a direct relationship between them and we can no longer claim that signifier = the signified. Instead of referring to an external, 'transcendental' signified, the signifier refers us – endlessly as it turns out – to other words in the linguistic system. Thus, language, statements, propositions are not reflections of an external or transcendental reality but only reflect the various "plays" of meaning within a linguistic system. After all, each word is, ultimately related to every other word and its meaning depends on the "play of differences within that system."<sup>127</sup> The meaning of each word is "inter-textualized"<sup>128</sup> with all the others so that each bears a "trace" of all other words. For that reason there is no inside our outside of a text: "We do not believe that there exists, in all rigor, a Platonic text closed upon itself complete with its inside and its outside."<sup>129</sup> Simply using words that are part of a language system ensures that the text is in some way influenced by all these other meanings and that these other meanings may play some role in the understanding of the text. This presence yet simultaneous absence of these other meanings is called the "trace". The scope of these traces is endless, for which reason Derrida says, "There is nothing outside of the text"<sup>130</sup>

beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as [a] text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations, which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from the trace and from an invocation of the supplement etc. And thus to infinity."<sup>131</sup>

Derrida also approaches the subject of endless supplementation from the perspective of "play" by which he means a word's 'give' or tolerance for variation of meanings and suggestions: "Play is always the play of absence and presence"<sup>132</sup> of all possible traces (of other meanings) which he also describes as a "field of infinite substitutions."<sup>133</sup> In addition, Derrida defines play as "the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say, as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence."<sup>134</sup> This simply means that there is no pre-existing essential meaning in a text i.e. no "transcendental signified", that waits us to perceive and understand it, that exists before us and even without us, and that becomes 'present' to us when we think 'correctly.' This pre-existing, unconstructed

“transcendental signified” can also be referred to as “an invariable presence – eidos, arche, telos, energia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia* [disclosure, revelation of truth], transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth.”<sup>135</sup> The “metaphysics of presence” and “ontotheology” are the product of thinking in terms of such pre-existent, invariable and self-sufficient essences. Such thinking is deceptive because it fails to take into account the ambiguities of meaning revealed by the “play” of substitutions, supplements and traces which makes the existence of such independent and self-sufficient meanings (and entities) a chimera. It leads to the dangerous delusion that some of us actually know the complete and final truth about something, have privileged knowledge, are privileged knowers or have privileged methods of accessing certain knowledge. This, in turn, leads us to marginalise, disregard or even oppress other kinds of knowledge and other ways of knowing. Such is already the case with western philosophy vis-à-vis non-western philosophy.<sup>136</sup> Finally, it should be noted that in this view, a text has no meaning before anyone has interpreted it.<sup>137</sup> There is no truth outside of or transcendental to, the interpretation and telling.

Another important aspect of Derrida’s deconstructionism is what he calls “logocentrism,”<sup>138</sup> a complex word rooted in the Greek ‘*logos*’ which means not only ‘word’ but also ‘truth’ or ‘reason.’ According to Derrida, all philosophy since the time of Plato has been the “epoch of the logos”<sup>139</sup> and one project of deconstruction is to undermine the domination of logocentrism in western thought. In its simplest terms, logocentrism assumes that at the centre of any concept is a meaning or essence that exists before the construction of its meaning and is undeconstructible in itself. This unconstructed and undeconstructible essence, is ‘transcendent’ to its embodiment in language, i.e. is not dependent on its linguistic embodiment for its meaning, i.e. is self-sufficient and complete in what it means. Our understanding of a concept is true insofar as it corresponds to this “transcendental signified” which “in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier [word in the linguistic system], would exceed the chain of signs and would no longer as itself function as a signifier.”<sup>140</sup> This “transcendental signified” also serves as a guarantee for the fixed meanings of the words we employ. Derrida states that he has “identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified.”<sup>141</sup> The “metaphysics presence” is that philosophical thinking which is interested in defining the

ultimate self-sufficient meanings of terms such as God, Reality, Truth, Matter, Mind, Consciousness, Time and Self and resists the conclusion that these, like all other words, are undecidable. These, like the Biblical "Logos"<sup>142</sup> precede any human perception of their meaning, and the aim of the metaphysics of presence is to make their true meaning present to us through language. However, for deconstructionism this is a hopeless quest because the meaning of these words is undecidable: "meaning cannot be held in any individual sign since it is always deferred due to the fact that every sign is a signifier whose signified is another signifier."<sup>143</sup> As Derrida puts it, "The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment or in any sense that a simple element [meaning] be present in and of itself, referring only to itself."<sup>144</sup>

Derrida also rejects logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence for their dependence on oppositional binaries which privilege one side over the other. Examples of such oppositional binaries are God/creation; Truth/untruth; Good/evil; Justice/injustice; rational/irrational; Being/nothingness; Mind/matter and Self/not-self.<sup>145</sup> Since the meanings of these binaries are, in the last analysis, undecidable, there is no justification for privileging one of the pair and marginalising the other.

Derrida maintains that logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence have an enormously negative impact on culture and human behavior. Nowhere is this made more clear than in his essay "*Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.*"

Although ostensibly about Levinas' philosophy, the essay also serves to outline Derrida's views about problems with phenomenology<sup>146</sup> and ontology<sup>147</sup> both of which are largely concerned with the essences of things, that is, those necessary qualities which a thing must have to be the kind of thing it is. Thus, they focus on kinds more than on individuals, for which reason Derrida says, Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same.<sup>148</sup>

In short, metaphysics does not respect the other as other but seeks to incorporate or appropriate it in some way, forgetting that "[t]he infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept."<sup>149</sup>

The other can never be reduced to common denominators or subsumed by a general concept of 'essence': "the other is the other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible."<sup>150</sup> Reducing the other to a common essence is a form of violence that inevitably breeds a violent frame of mind and violent discourse and finally physical violence.

## 8. Michel Foucault

Like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has been enormously influential in fields outside of his specialities of philosophy and social history. His writings cover such diverse topics as the social construction of madness<sup>151</sup> and sexuality<sup>152</sup>, methods in historiography<sup>153</sup>, penology<sup>154</sup>, the nature of power and discourse. He has had an incalculable effect on cultural studies, political theory, feminism and sociology.<sup>155</sup> It should be noted that there is a certain amount of debate over whether or not Foucault is a postmodernist but it is our view that he shares so many relevant fundamental characteristics with Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lyotard and Derrida, that his own refusal of the label notwithstanding, he is a part of this movement.<sup>156</sup>

Like Lyotard, Foucault rejects the concept of "grand narratives", i.e. he does not believe that it is possible to write generalized histories that covers all aspects of a particular civilization. He spells this out clearly in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

the theme and possibility of a total history begins to disappear ... The project of a total history is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle - material or spiritual - of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion ...<sup>157</sup>

Rather, he proposes what he calls "the new history"<sup>158</sup> which pays more attention to "discontinuity"<sup>159</sup>, to the "series, divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts, chronological specificities, particular forms of rehandling, possible types of relation."<sup>160</sup> Just as Derrida proclaims the necessity of subverting any authoritative reading of a text, Foucault believes that "the tranquility with which they [the usual historical narratives driven by grand themes] are received *must be disturbed*"<sup>161</sup> by renounc[ing] all those themes whose function is to ensure infinite continuity of discourse."<sup>162</sup> Historical discourse must be broken up into what Lyotard calls "little narratives" or *petits récits* because only when previously glossed

over differences become apparent will new fields of research be visible and available for investigation. We will become aware of discrepancies and differences that have been covered up by large sweeping unifying concepts and no longer lose sight of subtle but important shifts in meaning and usage. Each concept, person and event must be understood in terms of its exact specificity in time, place and culture.

Thus, Foucault's historiography not only stresses breaks and discontinuities rather than grand similarities, changes in ideas and practices rather than extended homogeneities, but also what he calls the "epistemes" in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms grounds its positivity, and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of *possibility* ... such an enterprise is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of the word, as an 'archaeology.'<sup>163</sup>

In other words, the episteme is the 'soil' from which 'vegetation' of ideas, behaviors, experiences, customs and beliefs grows; it makes all these things possible and, at the same time, establishes their character and limitations. Epistemes are "the fundamental codes of a culture."<sup>164</sup> According to Foucault, an episteme

in a given period delimits in the totality of the experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in the field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognised to be true.<sup>165</sup>

Thus, an episteme determines truth, meaning, identity, value and reality at a specific time and place. People need not even be consciously aware of the episteme or its power in their lives even though it creates the environment or context in which individuals think, feel, evaluate, behave and speak; it controls what can be said and understood as meaningful. Great social, cultural and intellectual changes are the result of changes in the underlying episteme. Archaeologies study these epistemes strictly for themselves but cannot draw any universal conclusions about 'humankind' or other epistemes from such examinations. This limitation is necessary because there is a sharp break or caesura between epistemes, i.e. "caeseuralism."<sup>166</sup> That is why, according to Foucault, archaeologies are more accurate accounts of studying the past: they are not "not



seduced by the mythology of a prevailing narrative"<sup>167</sup> or "grand narrative" that purports to provide a single overview of developments across several epistemes. Nor do archaeologies assume there are bridges of influence between epistemes, which is why, according to Foucault, "Archaeology does not seek to rediscover the continuous, insensible transition that relates discourses [epistemes]."<sup>168</sup> This view also makes any notion of progress impossible because there is no universal standard by which to measure such 'progress.' If epistemes and their products are not comparable, we can only say that one episteme is different from another, but not more advanced. Foucault makes this rejection of progress clear when he writes, "The history of sciences is not the history of the true, of its slow epiphany; it cannot hope to recount the gradual discovery of a truth."<sup>169</sup>

Changes in an episteme or changes from one episteme to another result in a revolution in perception and understanding: " 'things simply cease, all of a sudden, to be 'perceived, described, expressed, characterised, classified and known in the same way as before.' "<sup>170</sup> It is as if we were transplanted into a wholly new world which bears no significant comparison to the old. This why there are no bridges between epistemes.<sup>171</sup> To highlight the revolutionary and world-altering changes between epistemes, Foucault often makes such startling statements as "man is only a recent invention"<sup>172</sup> and

[b]efore the end of the eighteenth century, man did not exist ... He is a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with its own hands less than two hundred years ago: but he has grown so quickly that it has been only too easy to imagine that he has been waiting for thousands of years in the darkness for that moment in which he would be known.<sup>173</sup>

What he means is that the way 'man' or humankind is conceived of in the modern episteme is not the same as the conception of man in the ancient Greek or Renaissance or Classical (Enlightenment) episteme. Each of these epistemes constituted 'man' in its own way. In Foucault's view, 'man' appears only at the beginning of the nineteenth century (at the end of the Classical age) with the full realization of human finitude in its physical and contingent existence, as well as the realization that 'man' is part of an episteme in which the primary category is dynamic history and development rather than static order.<sup>174</sup> Modernity discovers "man' in his finitude,"<sup>175</sup> which is to say,

Modernity begins when the human being begins to exist within his organism, inside the shell of his head, the armature of his limbs,, and the whole structure of his physiology; when he begins to exist at the centre of a labour by whose principles he is governed ...<sup>176</sup>

What is obvious here is that the transcendent dimension has been stripped from life in modernity and this throws an ominous light on man's discovery of his "finitude." He finds himself "dominated by life, history and language"<sup>177</sup> instead of by transcendents like God, spirit, immortality and eternity, as was the case with Renaissance humanism and Classical rationalism. Enclosed in worldly existence, and more forcefully than ever before, man becomes aware of "the threatening rumble of his non-existence"<sup>178</sup> and discovers both within and outside himself "an element of darkness,"<sup>179</sup> as a kind of Other, the "unthought"<sup>180</sup> that is an inescapable twin to his being.

To know man boiled down to grasping the determinations of concrete human existence in the facts of life, labour and language, all of which mould man even before his birth as an individual.<sup>181</sup>

Furthermore, this immersion in the empirical and material had a problem, namely that it was impossible to have empirical knowledge without recognising that reason is, at least to a certain degree, transcendent to the empirical facts. If it were not, how could it serve as a standard to supply and apply criteria of judgment, distinguish truth from error and the rational from the irrational? Thus, modern man appears divided between the empirical and the transcendent i.e. is an "empirico-transcendent doublet."<sup>182</sup> This is why man in the modern episteme is subject to deep self-misunderstanding, always torn between two poles of his being.

In addition to the archaeology of knowledge which concerned itself with systems of discourse, Foucault also developed a method called "genealogy" whose purpose was to explain how changes occurred within an episteme and how one episteme changed into another. However, while archaeology focussed on the ruling or dominant episteme, the genealogy also looked to marginalised knowledge or knowledge about marginalised subjects that were often in conflict with the ruling episteme. Genealogies up-set (or as Derrida says, "subvert") the established hierarchies and show how this marginalised or subjugated knowledge interacts with and influences the ruling episteme. It also pays special attention to the accidents,

coincidences, tricks, mistakes, unforeseen “eruptions” and arbitrary actions that have effected the history of an idea or episteme in order to show that development is never simply a smooth, orderly development:

The forces operating in history do not obey destiny or regulative mechanism, but the luck of the battle. [Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, II, 12] They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attention is not always that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events ... the world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause where there is only “the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance” ... Effective history, on the other hand shortens its vision to those things nearest to it – the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion, and energies; it unearths decadence ... [history] should become a differential knowledge of energies, failings, heights and degenerations, poisons and antidotes.... The final trait of effective history is its affirmation of perspectival knowledge ...<sup>183</sup>

This quotation makes four things clear. First, Foucault does not believe that there is any dominant pattern, intentionality (divine or otherwise), plan, “final cause,” order or logic to history. Second, chance and the “randomness of events” are the ‘reasons’ various historical developments take place. This makes the whole notion of progress problematical.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, as already indicated, Foucault does not believe in progress from one episteme to another but only in their succession. Third, Foucault sees history as influenced by seemingly insignificant or even ‘shameful’ actions and events, by our physiological attributes which is to say by the ‘marginal’, shunted aside as unworthy. Fourth, our knowledge of history is perspectival, i.e. always based on our own position in our own native episteme; this means that an ‘objective’ view is unattainable.

A fundamental question about Foucault’s epistemes is whether or not they can admit the actual existence of ‘things’ prior to discourse in an episteme? In terms we have already used for Derrida, can things be external to or transcendental to the episteme in which they are constituted?

Is there a ‘God’, or a ‘soul’ that exists prior to and independently of a word/concept with a place in an episteme or are all these things human constructions? In Kantian terms,

which readily spring to mind here, are there noumena which our epistemes (or transcendental egos) constitute as phenomenal reality? According to Darren Hynes, "For Foucault, any word-referent has no concreteness, nor is there a reality which precedes discourse and reveals itself to discursive perception."<sup>185</sup> Here, too, Foucault agrees with Derrida. Indeed, how could Foucault concern himself with anything which exists prior to its place in the discursive structure of an episteme? How would one be able to speak about it? Furthermore, if such transcendent entities existed, they would threaten one of the fundamental principles of archaeological and genealogical analysis, namely, that no episteme, no viewpoint is privileged over any other. If there is a transcendent reference – be it God, or an a-historical essence which endures through successive epistemes – then it follows that the signifiers of some epistemes will correspond more accurately in some way than others to the original, transcendent signified. Not only would this violate his goal of providing a non-hierarchical view of different epistemes, but it would also violate the principle that comparisons across epistemes are not possible. As well, it means that there exists, even if only in principle, an 'Archimedean standpoint' – for example God's viewpoint as revealed through His Manifestations – outside of the various epistemes from which we can obtain objective knowledge, i.e. knowledge free of all epistemes. In a word, the existence of things before their 'naming' in an episteme would be a revival of essentialism – a belief in independently existing (transcendental) entities with unchanging, historically unconditioned essences – a concept impossible for Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies to accommodate.

Any attempt to write or speak about the nature [essence] of things is made from within a rule-governed linguistic framework, an 'episteme' that pre-determines what kinds of statements are true or meaningful ... There is no absolute, unconditioned, transcendental stance from which to grasp what is good, right or true. Foucault refuses to specify what is true because there are no objective grounds for knowledge ...<sup>186</sup>

Foucault's suspicion of the concept of an inherent nature or essence is also evident when he says history teaches us that "behind things [there is] not a timeless essential secret but the secret that they have no essence."<sup>187</sup> This is emphasised by his statement that he is "suspicious of the notion of liberation"<sup>188</sup> because "it runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there

exists a human nature"<sup>189</sup> which somehow exists 'apart' from us and which we can rediscover and regain. He rejects the existence of any such essence or nature. For Foucault, it makes no sense to talk of anything outside of or 'underneath' or transcendent to an episteme, which is to say that until a thing is constituted by human beings, it makes no sense to talk of it as 'existing.' Indeed, his goal is

[t]o define these objects without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form objects of discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance."<sup>190</sup>

Elsewhere he says that the object "does not pre-exist itself,"<sup>191</sup> which is to say, it does not exist before discourse. This even applies to the human subject who does not transcend the episteme in which s/he dwells; s/he is a product of the episteme as much as anything else.

The radical nature of this rejection of natures or essences prior to being constituted becomes apparent when applied to gender, race, health, sanity or even human life.<sup>192</sup> All essentialist definitions of these terms are pure historical constructs valid for a particular episteme but have no universal validity. In the field of gender this means that there is no universal definition of what constitutes a woman or man and all such definitions should be resisted as unjustly imprisoning us. This rejection of a 'human nature' or essence extends to the 'self.' According to Foucault's philosophy, what we mean by 'self' or 'subject' varies from one episteme to another, which is to say that the 'self' is historically contingent product and no one analysis of the self can lead to universal conclusions. In other words, all concepts of self are context-bound and there simply is no stable, universal 'core' or essence constituting the self. Like everything else, the self is merely "a passing historical invention"<sup>193</sup> and is no more stable than concepts of male and female, justice, race, rationality or beauty. In the words of Danaher, Schirato and Webb,

Rather than being the free and active organisers of society, we are the products of discourses and power relations, and take on different characteristics according to the range of subject positions that are possible in our socio-historical context.<sup>194</sup>

We are products of the "games of truth"<sup>195</sup> that constitute any given episteme also compose the self and from this it

follows that the self cannot pre-exist the episteme or society of which it is a part. For this reason, the self "is not a substance. It is a form and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself."<sup>196</sup> This statement makes two noteworthy points. First, that the self is not a substance means that there is no persisting essence to which the concept refers and which it can reflect. Second, even within itself, the self constantly changes in regards to itself as it engages in different activities and relationships. As a "political subject"<sup>197</sup> at a meeting or in the voting booth we relate to ourselves in a different form than we do as a caring spouse or parent. One might well describe this self as 'de-centered' because there does not seem to be anything – no essence, no substance, no transcendent soul – to focus the various relationships and holding them together other than the contingencies of time and place. At most it is "a form" but what such a form that is not even "identical to itself" is supposed to be is not at all clear.

From this it is clear that Foucault's concept of the self is not the single, unitary self that we find in the philosophy of Descartes or in Kant's transcendental subject of unity of apperception which is the basis of our personal consciousness, that which allows us to say 'I'. One might also say that Foucault rejects the "idea of the self-governing subject"<sup>198</sup> since the self is constituted and controlled by the varying discourses and "games of truth" making up the episteme it inhabits. "We are the products of discourses and power relations, and take on different characteristics according to the range of subject positions that are possible in our socio-historical context."<sup>199</sup> Obviously there is no special need for consistency in such a concept of self. Best and Kellner sum up this aspect of Foucault's thought by saying that "Foucault rejects the active subject and welcomes the emerging postmodern era as a positive event where the denuding of agency occurs and new forms of thought can emerge."<sup>200</sup>

Another consequence of Foucault's archaeology and genealogy is epistemological relativism which follows from his belief that epistemes are compartmentalized and that we cannot make evaluations and judgments across differing epistemes. Their discourse is too different; appearances of similarity notwithstanding, there are inevitably important breaks and dislocations of meaning that cannot simply be glossed over. We have no way of asserting the universal validity of any so-called truth because there is no universal standard by which to make any judgments about the truth or untruth of propositions

found in various epistemes. How could such a standard exist when all such standards are themselves bound to some particular episteme? All we can do instead of making judgments is to note differences and changes, and express our own preferences or even try to enforce them. In this situation, there cannot, as already noted, be any notion of progress through a succession of epistemes. Nor can there be any question of a universally valid hierarchy of ethical actions with some being preferable to others since there can be no universal standard by which to make such decisions.

Foucault's epistemological relativism is reinforced by his suspicion of the Enlightenment and reason. According to Foucault, his ethos "implies, first, the refusal of what I like to call the 'blackmail' of the Enlightenment."<sup>201</sup> As Best and Kellner inform us, "Foucault draws upon an anti-Enlightenment tradition that rejects the equation of reason, emancipation, and progress."<sup>202</sup> Reason cannot be taken as a guide to universal knowledge because reason itself is simply one particular kind of discourse with a particular – western – episteme; it is an invention like all the others and no more or less reliable than any other.

I do not believe in a kind of founding act whereby reason, in its essence, was discovered or established ... I think, in fact, that reason is self-created, which is why I have tried to analyse forms of rationality: different foundations, different creations, different modifications in which rationalities engender one another, oppose and pursue one another<sup>203</sup>

In short, reason is thoroughly historical:

What reason perceives as its necessity or, rather, what different forms of rationality offer as necessary being can perfectly well be shown to have a history; and the network of contingencies from which it emerges can be traced.<sup>204</sup>

That is why "no given form of rationality is actually reason."<sup>205</sup> From this view it follows that reason cannot provide universally valid knowledge. One might argue that it is difficult even to know what the words 'reason' or 'knowledge' can mean in Foucault's philosophy since both refer only to what the episteme has constituted or constructed, and thus, could conceivably mean anything at all. Foucault mitigates this argument somewhat by stating that their meaning is based on human practice throughout history – but he does admit "that since these things have been made, they can be unmade as long

as we know how it was they were made.”<sup>206</sup> In other words, in the last analysis, there are few limits on the future development of the concept of reason showing that the original critique has some force.

For Foucault, the analysis of reason is closely tied to the subjects of truth or knowledge and power. Truth may differ from one episteme to another, but within each episteme each truth is part of a system of power:

[T]ruth isn't outside power or lacking power ... truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude ... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint ... Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.<sup>207</sup>

This quotation, which encapsulates much of Foucault's thought on this subject, shows that truth is closely linked to the power to control the discourse of a particular episteme by distinguishing true from false, acceptable from unacceptable evidence, high status from low status and legitimate from illegitimate methods of gathering truth. This makes it clear that all concepts of truth are exclusionary and marginalising, and violent by nature because they can dominate other versions of truth under a particular “regime of truth.” In other words, truth is a matter of cultural and epistemological politics not merely a matter of objective discovery and rational evaluation. Moreover, because the social status of those who determine truth is high, truth tends to become the property of a particular class and can be manipulated to serve its interests.

Another important aspect of truth or knowledge is that they are linked to the will-to-power, i.e. and the will-to-truth and the will-to-power are closely correlated which is why Foucault says that we cannot liberate truth from systems of power: “truth is already power.”<sup>208</sup> As J.G. Merquior writes, for Foucault, “all will to truth is already a will-to-power.”<sup>209</sup> This is because for a claim to be recognised as ‘true’ means that it has already triumphed over its rivals and excluded them or marginalised them as ‘untrue’ or ‘mythology’ or ‘superstition’. Foucault himself states the matter even more sharply:



The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge [*vouleur-savior*] reveals that all knowledge [*connaissance*] rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing truth, to truth or a foundation for truth.), and the instinct for knowledge malicious ( something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind).<sup>210</sup>

Elsewhere he even claims that knowledge “creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence.”<sup>211</sup> Foucault’s beliefs lead to the conclusion that the claim to know the truth is also, in effect, a claim to power, i.e. a claim to domination over others and competing truth claims. Best and Kellner summarise Foucault’s beliefs by writing,

Against modern theories that see knowledge as neutral and objective (positivism) or emancipatory (Marxism), Foucault emphasizes that knowledge is in dissociable from regimes of power. His concept of ‘power/knowledge’ is symptomatic of the postmodern suspicion of reason and the emancipatory schemes advanced in its name.<sup>212</sup>

Foucault believes that knowledge “has the power to make itself true”<sup>213</sup> insofar as it constrains and regulates our thoughts, feelings, actions and even laws. What is certainly clear is that for Foucault the notion of a disinterested, objective, neutral and pure truth is at best a naïve fiction but more likely a ruse to trick one’s rivals into quitting the contest for power.

## 9. Richard Rorty (1931 - 2007)

Although he prefers to call himself a pragmatist,<sup>214</sup> the American philosopher (or ‘anti-philosopher’ as he is sometimes called) Richard Rorty is generally regarded as having developed an American version of postmodernist philosophy.<sup>215</sup> Reading his work leaves little doubt that he shares many of postmodernism’s principles and beliefs: the rejection of representationalism, of realism, of “grand narratives,” and of ‘truth, rationality, essentialism, objectivity, foundationalism and metaphysics. He would replace what is usually called ‘philosophy’ with an edifying<sup>216</sup> conversation and an exchange of descriptions of the world among those whose only goal is to keep the conversation going.<sup>217</sup> The purpose of the edifying conversation is certainly not to find truth or rational justification of truth since Rorty’s goal is to “radically undermine the very basis of the dominant rationalist approach.”<sup>218</sup>

Rorty's undermining of the rationalist tradition based on Socrates and Plato begins with his rejection of the principle that the human mind and language are mirrors whose task is to accurately reflect or represent a pre-existent reality. The goal of rational inquirers is to make their representations as objective as possible, i.e. to make them correspond to reality. In this way, we would find or discover the truth about the real world. Rorty unambiguously rejects this referential thinking as well as its consequences. For example, he writes,

My suggestion that the desire for objectivity is in part a disguised form of the fear of death echoes Nietzsche's charge that the philosophical tradition which stems from Plato is an attempt to avoid facing up to contingency, to escape from time and chance.<sup>219</sup>

He sees no value in objectivity which he dismisses as wanting a "sky-hook provided by some contemporary yet-to-be-developed science"<sup>220</sup> to free us from the biases of being culture-bound because he does not think we can ever escape being imprisoned in our cultures. Therefore,

[t]hose who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity – call them "pragmatists" – do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truths as, in William James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence' nor an account of human cognitive abilities which ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation ...For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community but simply the desire to for as much intersubjective agreement as possible<sup>221</sup>

In other words, Rorty has given up the quest for scientific objectivity which he regards as an impossible effort to transcend our cultural boundaries and settles for a 'political' goal, i.e. solidarity, i.e. he lets epistemology go for the politics of knowledge. That is why he can say we do not "require either a metaphysics or an epistemology." Elsewhere he claims that the positivists were right in seeking to "extirpate metaphysics when 'metaphysics' means the attempt to give knowledge of what science cannot know,"<sup>222</sup> i.e. knowledge that transcends particular scientific facts – although these latter are also thrown into question by Rorty's views about the incommensurability of different vocabularies or "truth games" and the need for solidarity. The latter is also why he gives up on the

correspondence theory of knowledge which leads to arguments because it maintains that some knowledge is natural "and not merely local"<sup>223</sup> and that some methods of justification are natural and not merely social or cultural. Thus, it is impossible for him to say that some knowledge is truer or reflects reality better than other. "We must get the visual and in particular the mirroring metaphors out of our speech altogether."<sup>224</sup> Making this rejection of correspondence even more clear, he insists that we admit that sentences are only "connected with other sentences rather than with the world."<sup>225</sup> That being the case, it follows that his pragmatism "views knowledge not as a relation between mind and object but, roughly, as the ability to get agreement by using persuasion rather than force."<sup>226</sup> If we cannot appeal to the facts of reality for support, and if, as we shall see, reason is only another "platitude," then, unless we wish to use force, we have only persuasion left.

Rorty describes himself as an "ironist"<sup>227</sup> which is to say, he doubts that his own particular language or vocabulary can adequately attain truth and objectivity; he recognises that his current philosophical language cannot resolve these doubts. He does not think his language is closer to the truth or reality than anyone else's. For this reason, ironists repudiate the whole concept of representationalism, i.e. the concept that our verbal or mathematical descriptions of reality really represent what is 'out there.' Furthermore, because they realise that their descriptions of reality are limited in descriptive capacity, contingent and subject to constant change and or more in touch with reality than others, ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously."<sup>228</sup> Ironists are also people who "do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves."<sup>229</sup> They do not look to God or revelation nor to a supposedly universal reason or logic nor a grand narrative to resolve their doubts. Instead, they possess a great deal of what the poet John Keats called "negative capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>230</sup> As well, ironists are nominalists, they think "nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence,"<sup>231</sup> that is what it is independently of human observation and attribution.<sup>232</sup> All alleged attributes are human constructions, the products of our cultural and historical positioning and the discourse we employ and for that reason there are no universal characteristics of anything including human nature.<sup>233</sup> There is simply no way to transcend our language and culture and compare it with 'reality' from some 'Archimedean point' to

obtain a 'God's eye view' on the world. We should simply recognise that we cannot "come up with a single set of criteria which everybody in all times and places can accept, invent a single language game which can somehow take over all jobs previously done by all the language-games ever played."<sup>234</sup> Rather, our particular culture and language construct what we appear to perceive and we are locked into these constructions, a view which was already pre-figured by Kant. Hence any attempts to use so-called essential attributes as the basis of universal statements are doomed; knowing this, ironists do

not take the point of discursive thought to be knowing, in any sense that can be explicated by notions like "reality," "real essence," "objective point of view," and the "correspondence of language of [*sic*] reality." They do not think its point is to find a vocabulary which accurately represents something, a transparent meaning.<sup>235</sup>

At this point it comes as no surprise that Rorty describes reason as a faculty that "can now be dispensed with - and should be dispensed with"<sup>236</sup> because for ironists criteria of reason, like other criteria used for judging among descriptions of the world "are never more than platitudes which contextually define the terms of the final vocabulary in use."<sup>237</sup> These criteria are valid, if at all, only within the language or language game in which they are being used. Indeed, philosophy is so language and culture dependent that according to Rorty there is no legitimate use of the distinction "between logic and rhetoric, or between philosophy and literature, or between rational and nonrational methods of changing other people's minds."<sup>238</sup> In this vein, Rorty writes, On a pragmatist view, rationality is not the exercise of a faculty called 'reason' - a faculty which stands in some determinate relationship to reality, Nor is the use of a method. It is simply a matter of being open and curious and relying on persuasion rather than force.<sup>239</sup>

In short, 'rational' only means 'persuasive.' It is time to realize that the Enlightenment has been "discredited."<sup>240</sup> There are no necessary 'logical' or reasonable connections between sentences or propositions that can require us to admit anything we prefer not to.

On Rorty's view, philosophy cannot be a quest for 'truth' or 'true understanding' since the most we can do is redescribe things to our individual and/or collective liking and discuss our various descriptions. In other words, the purpose of philosophy is to be edifying: "I shall is 'edification' to stand for this project

of finding new, better, more interesting more fruitful ways of speaking.”<sup>241</sup> Edifying philosophy “takes its point of departure from suspicion about the pretensions of epistemology,”<sup>242</sup> which is to say that edifying philosophy is not longer interested in attaining truth.<sup>243</sup> Thus, rather than take part in an inquiry for the ‘knowledge,’ “we just might be *saying something*”<sup>244</sup> simply in order to “keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth.”<sup>245</sup> This, for Rorty is “a sufficient aim of philosophy.”<sup>246</sup> At most we can strive for solidarity for in the post-Auschwitz age: “What can there be except human solidarity, our recognition of one another’s common humanity.”<sup>247</sup> (It is, of course highly ironic that Rorty appeals to our “common humanity” after having repudiated ‘essences’ and the possibility of cross-cultural universal statements.) Given Rorty’s views, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that philosophy is just pleasant talk, in itself of no great consequence and remember that we can always change the subject with no great harm done.<sup>248</sup>

Rorty emphatically rejects the notion of a “core self,”<sup>249</sup> i.e. the rejection of the claim that there is a human essence either for the individual or for the species. In his view, “there is no self distinct from this self-reweaving web”<sup>250</sup> of muscles, movements, beliefs and states of mind. In reflecting on these weaving and reweaving patterns, we must

avoid taking common speech as committing one to the view that there is, after all, such a thing as a “True Self,” the inner core of one’s being which remains what it is independent of changes in one’s beliefs and desires. There is no more a center to the self than there is to the brain.<sup>251</sup>

We must not let our ordinary usage of pronouns such as ‘I’ or ‘me’ fool us into thinking there is any substantive entity that actually corresponds to these words. All thoughts about a ‘True Self’ or soul are delusional. We should “avoid the self-deception of thinking that we possess a deep, hidden, metaphysically significant nature which makes us ‘irreducibly’ different from inkwells or atoms.”<sup>252</sup>

## 10. Baudrillard (1929 - 2007)

Jean Baudrillard, who has attained “guru status throughout the English-speaking world “as a high priest of the new epoch,”<sup>253</sup> is in some respects the most controversial of the five contemporary postmodernists we shall examine. Baudrillard embodied his postmodern philosophy in socio-cultural,

economic and political analyses that were distinguished not only by his challenging insights but also by his flair for startling turns of phrase and outrageous assertions. For example, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* he claims that the 2001 Gulf War was more a matter of events on TV and radar screens than a real war in the traditional sense, that it was more a virtual war than anything else. Elsewhere he writes, "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which *is* Disneyland."<sup>254</sup> When we look into or beneath Baudrillard's multifarious analyses, we find that he shares many if not all of the same themes and views as the postmodernists we have examined previously.

The keys to Baudrillard's thought are the twin concepts of simulations and simulacra. In *Simulations*, Baudrillard briefly retells a Borges story of a map that is so detailed in every respect that it covers the entire territory it is supposed to represent and is indistinguishable from it. The map and the territory have become one, the distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' has been blurred as has the distinction between original and copy, natural and artificial and signifier and signified. What, if anything, we may ask, does the map *represent*? And which is the map and which is the territory when "[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance."<sup>255</sup> Obviously, the whole notion of representation is no longer tenable. We must also recognise that "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'."<sup>256</sup> How could one distinguish between them? Other threatened binaries are cause/effect, active/passive, subject/object and ends/means.<sup>257</sup> The essential natures of these categories no longer exist because they have all been melded into one another. They have, to use Derrida's term, been deconstructed, i.e. it has been shown that the old notion of distinct and stable essences making up the binary oppositions of signifier/signified, map/territory, real/imaginary, true/false, original/copy, appearance/reality, the ideal/real and essential/nonessential are no longer functional with each part of the pair blending into the other. Furthermore, if all these essential differences no longer exist, it is impossible to be rational since rationality depends on clear and distinct oppositional binaries or categories of thought that allow us to attain clear and decisive answers.

Metaphysics is also impossible according to Baudrillard. In the first place, "truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist."<sup>258</sup> If these three are not clearly identifiable,

metaphysics, which requires clearly identified causal relationships in its study of the structure and nature of reality, become impossible. Secondly, if our propositions are no longer referential and do not refer to reality, we cannot discuss reality at all let alone decide which propositions are true; as Baudrillard puts it: "All the referentials intermingle their discourses in a circular Moebian compulsion"<sup>259</sup> and thus deprive reason of the "clear and distinct ideas"<sup>260</sup> it needs. Consequently, we can no longer distinguish real from unreal, or appearance from reality and with this situation

goes all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept ... It [the real] no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary [ideal], it is no longer real at all. It is hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory in a hyperspace without atmosphere.<sup>261</sup>

Finally, without reason or logic metaphysics is also impossible because reason provides the rules by means of which our propositions about reality lead to conclusions. Eventually, Baudrillard replaced metaphysics with the satirical 'pataphysics,' a term borrowed from the surrealist movement, to illustrate what happens to thought when distinctions among categories disappear. This is why "for pataphysics all phenomena are absolutely gaseous."<sup>262</sup>

According to Baudrillard, the "blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal"<sup>263</sup> is the "hyperreal," which is "a condition whereby the models replace the real, as exemplified in such phenomena as the ideal home in women's or lifestyle magazines, ideal sex ... ideal fashion."<sup>264</sup> In each of these, the model, the simulation determines what is regarded as real and thus, ultimately, the simulations constitute reality. For that reason, the power relationship between the real and unreal simulation has been reversed, with the unreal now so much in control that we can say that real understood in the traditional, i.e. pre-postmodern sense no longer exists: "there is no real."<sup>265</sup> Because we live in such a hyperreality where the simulation constitutes reality, Baudrillard is able to say that Disneyland is the real America and that the 2001 Gulf War never happened except as a television event. To our usual way of thinking this makes no sense because the original 'real thing' always has ontological priority over the any simulation but as Baudrillard tells us, "The contradictory process of true and false, of real

and the imaginary is abolished in this hyperreal logic of montage.”<sup>266</sup> By the “logic of montage” he means the ‘logic’ of concepts or realities which overlap and impinge on and melt into one another, losing thereby their distinct boundaries and with that loss, their usual rules of combination or exclusion. Oppositional binaries such as original/copy, prior/secondary and this/that no longer hold. “The hyperreal represents a much more advanced phase [than modernist realism] in the sense that even this contradiction between the real world and the imaginary is effaced.”<sup>267</sup> Baudrillard calls this development “the collapse of reality into hyperrealism.”<sup>268</sup> This development changes our relationship to reality because “it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality.”<sup>269</sup> Reality disappears in its simulations because similitude is ultimately equivalent to the murder of the original, a nullification of original’s unique ontological status as prior in the order of time and logic.<sup>270</sup>

The dominance of the hyperreal has the effect of collapsing the difference between art and reality and thus mingling the two so that reality itself becomes a work of art:

And so art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality. And so art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence [difference from reality] is gone but because reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image.<sup>271</sup>

From this it follows that the binary opposition of work/play has also been dissolved. Indeed, because of the collapse of all binary differences, the postmodern condition “is for Baudrillard a play with all forms of sexuality, art, and politics, combining and recombining forms and possibilities, moving into the ‘the time of transvestism.’”<sup>272</sup> This “combining and recombining” of concepts, categories, styles and content liberates things from their former limits and hyperbolizes existence, for which reason he also refers to the “post-orgy state of things.”<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*; Steven Best and Douglas Keller, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty

<sup>3</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*;



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- <sup>6</sup> Foucault
- <sup>7</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*.
- <sup>8</sup> Lacan; Deleuze and Guattari
- <sup>9</sup> Heidegger's term.
- <sup>10</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Devices."
- <sup>11</sup> Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*, p. 1.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 2, p. 100.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Audi, editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.
- <sup>14</sup> "Postmodernism", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/ ; See also, *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,
- <sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.
- <sup>16</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interpretations*, p. 4-5.
- <sup>17</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation V. See also *Regulae* by Descartes.
- <sup>18</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation 1, para.2.
- <sup>19</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation IV.
- <sup>20</sup> Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations" in Linda J Nicholson, ed., *Feminism /Postmodernism*, p. 41-42.
- <sup>21</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, p.11
- <sup>22</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
- <sup>23</sup> Lloyd Spencer, "Postmodernism, Modernity and the Tradition of Dissent" in Stuart Sim ed. *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, p. 161.
- <sup>24</sup> See Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason* which is entirely based on the premise of humankind's rational nature: "we have no knowledge of any other rational beings beside man." (Preface). It is interesting to note that the Bahá'í Writings posit man's "rational soul" (*Some Answered Questions*, 208.)
- <sup>25</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 3, Section III.
- <sup>26</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 3, Section V.
- <sup>27</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 2.
- <sup>28</sup> Ammittai F. Aviram, "Asking the Question: Kant and Postmodernism?"
- <sup>29</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 2, Section II, Subsection IV.
- <sup>30</sup> Stephen R.C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, p. 37.
- <sup>31</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p.12.
- <sup>32</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p. 12
- <sup>33</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Devices."

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- <sup>34</sup> Clayton Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernists, Essays Pro and Contra*, p.5.
- <sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 18.
- <sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Reason in Philosophy”, # 6.
- <sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.
- <sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.
- <sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 17.
- <sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.
- <sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.
- <sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.
- <sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #493.
- <sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #534.
- <sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #537.
- <sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #555.
- <sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552; emphasis added.
- <sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *Of Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*.
- <sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, paragraph 12; also *The Will to Power*, # 481.
- <sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 480: “knowledge works as a tool of power.”
- <sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, paragraph 12.
- <sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #5.
- <sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 481.
- <sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 560; see also # 583.
- <sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 480.
- <sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #34.
- <sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #34.
- <sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #24.
- <sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #24.
- <sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #616.
- <sup>61</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*
- <sup>62</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “Upon the Happy Isles”, p. 85.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid. 85.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid. 196.
- <sup>65</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Existence and Being.”  
[www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/heidegger2.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/heidegger2.htm)
- <sup>66</sup> Robert Audi, editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 563.
- <sup>67</sup> Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, p. 26.
- <sup>68</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.2.; in other works, Heidegger spells

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it 'being' without the capital.

<sup>69</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.2.

<sup>70</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" in Julian Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, p. 26; italics added.

<sup>71</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being."

<sup>72</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being"

<sup>73</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned." Heidegger would fully agree with this poem.

<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 47.

<sup>75</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p. 178.

<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned."

<sup>77</sup> Cristine Lafont, "Precis of 'Heidegger, Language and World-Disclosure'"

<sup>78</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth". [evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/heidegger6a.htm](http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/heidegger6a.htm)

<sup>79</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth".

<sup>80</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth".

<sup>81</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 261.

<sup>82</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."

<sup>83</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."

<sup>84</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.259.

<sup>85</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.259; italics added.

<sup>86</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."

<sup>87</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p.130.

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 270.

<sup>89</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being."

<sup>90</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."

<sup>91</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."

<sup>92</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."

<sup>93</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p.161.

<sup>94</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, p.161.

<sup>95</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p.36.

<sup>96</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being."

<sup>97</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.204.

<sup>98</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.204.

<sup>99</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.

<sup>100</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiii.

<sup>101</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.34.

<sup>102</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.

<sup>103</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.

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- <sup>104</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.31.
- <sup>105</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.
- <sup>106</sup> Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Deficits*
- <sup>107</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.146.
- <sup>108</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.9.
- <sup>109</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.10.
- <sup>110</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.10.
- <sup>111</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.15.
- <sup>112</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.17.
- <sup>113</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.60.
- <sup>114</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, p.32.
- <sup>115</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.40.
- <sup>116</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.26.
- <sup>117</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.26.
- <sup>118</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.40.
- <sup>119</sup> *ibid.* 43; Rorty develops this concept of consensus further.
- <sup>120</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p.86; italics added.
- <sup>121</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 24; italics added.
- <sup>122</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p. 95.
- <sup>123</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p. 127.
- <sup>124</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.298; also p.281.
- <sup>125</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p.58.
- <sup>126</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p.129-130.
- <sup>127</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, p.144.
- <sup>128</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, p.144.
- <sup>129</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p.130.
- <sup>130</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.158; also p.163..
- <sup>131</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.158.
- <sup>132</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 292.
- <sup>133</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 291.
- <sup>134</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 50.
- <sup>135</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" in *Writing and Difference*, p.280.
- <sup>136</sup> Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology" in *Margins of Philosophy*, p.207.
- <sup>137</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, p.71.
- <sup>138</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.12.
- <sup>139</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.12.

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- <sup>140</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p.19.
- <sup>141</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.
- <sup>142</sup> *John*, 1: 1-2.
- <sup>143</sup> Sorchá Fogarty, "Logocentrism," in *The Literary Encyclopedia*.
- <sup>144</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 23.
- <sup>145</sup> Of special concern to Derrida is the binary Speech/writing which he tries to overturn by showing how writing, i.e. arche-writing as the play of differences and supplements, precedes speech which itself depends on that play of differences.
- <sup>146</sup> Phenomenology studies our experience of an object and seeks to extract the essential features of what we experience.
- <sup>147</sup> Ontology is a branch of metaphysics focusing on the study of being and beings.
- <sup>148</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 91.
- <sup>149</sup> Ibid. 95.
- <sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 104.
- <sup>151</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.
- <sup>152</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.
- <sup>153</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.
- <sup>154</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
- <sup>155</sup> Andrew Thacker, "Michel Foucault", *The Literary Encyclopedia*.
- <sup>156</sup> Scott H. More, "Christian History, Providence and Foucault", *Fides et Historia*, XXIX:1 (Winter/Spring 1997): 5-14.
- <sup>157</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.10.
- <sup>158</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- <sup>159</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.23.
- <sup>160</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- <sup>161</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28; emphasis added.
- <sup>162</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28.
- <sup>163</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.xxii; emphasis added.
- <sup>164</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theories: Critical Interrogations*, p.41.
- <sup>165</sup> Michel Foucault, interview in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, quoted in J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.36.
- <sup>166</sup> J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.61.
- <sup>167</sup> Charles Sherpherdson, "History and the Real: Foucault with Lacan" [www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.195/shepherd.195](http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.195/shepherd.195)
- <sup>168</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 155.
- <sup>169</sup> Michel Foucault, "Life, Experience and Science," in *The Essential Foucault*, p.11.
- <sup>170</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, in J.G.Merquior, *Foucault*, p.61.

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- <sup>171</sup> J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.50.
- <sup>172</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.xxiii
- <sup>173</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.308.
- <sup>174</sup> J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.52.
- <sup>175</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.319.
- <sup>176</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.318.
- <sup>177</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.335.
- <sup>178</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.308.
- <sup>179</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.326..
- <sup>180</sup> Foucault's term, J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p. 55.
- <sup>181</sup> J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.53.
- <sup>182</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.322.
- <sup>183</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.361.
- <sup>184</sup> J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p. 60-61.
- <sup>185</sup> Darren Hynes, "Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge." [www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc1.html](http://www.mun.ca/phil/codgito/vol4/v4doc1.html)
- <sup>186</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Devices."
- <sup>187</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.353.
- <sup>188</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for the Self" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.76.
- <sup>189</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for the Self" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.76.
- <sup>190</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.53.
- <sup>191</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.49.
- <sup>192</sup> James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism*, p.122.
- <sup>193</sup> Jorge Garcia, "Are Categories Invented or Discovered? A Response to Foucault." *Review of Metaphysics*, 55.1: 3-20.
- <sup>194</sup> Danaher, Schirato, Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, p.118.
- <sup>195</sup> Danaher, Schirato, Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, p.40.
- <sup>196</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.33.
- <sup>197</sup> *ibid.* 33.
- <sup>198</sup> Danaher, Schirato, Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, p.31.
- <sup>199</sup> Danaher, Schirato, Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, p.118.
- <sup>200</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.51.
- <sup>201</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.51.
- <sup>202</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.34.

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- <sup>203</sup> Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," in *The Essential Foucault*, p.89.
- <sup>204</sup> *ibid.* 94.
- <sup>205</sup> *Ibid.* 93.
- <sup>206</sup> *ibid.* 94.
- <sup>207</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.316.
- <sup>208</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.317.
- <sup>209</sup> J.G.Merquior, *Foucault*, p. 108.
- <sup>210</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *The Essential Foucault*, p.366.
- <sup>211</sup> Michel Foucault, "Homage to Jean Hippolyte" in Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, p.120.
- <sup>212</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p. 50.
- <sup>213</sup> Moya K Mason, "Foucault." [www.moyak.com/researcher/resume/papers/Foucault.html](http://www.moyak.com/researcher/resume/papers/Foucault.html)
- <sup>214</sup> Dean Guerras, "Richard Rorty and the Postmodern Rejection of Absolute Truth."
- <sup>215</sup> On the other hand, his understanding of pragmatist philosophy has been scathingly called into question by no less an authority than Susan Haack in "Vulgar Rortyism." [newcriterion.com:81/archive/16/nov97/menand.htm](http://newcriterion.com:81/archive/16/nov97/menand.htm)
- <sup>216</sup> Rorty's term; see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.360.
- <sup>217</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.378.
- <sup>218</sup> Chantal Mouffe editor, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p.1.
- <sup>219</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 32.
- <sup>220</sup> *Ibid.* 13.
- <sup>221</sup> *Ibid.* 22 - 23.
- <sup>222</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.384.
- <sup>223</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 22.
- <sup>224</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.371.
- <sup>225</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.372.
- <sup>226</sup> Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.98.
- <sup>227</sup> Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.73.
- <sup>228</sup> *ibid.* 73; also 89.
- <sup>229</sup> Richard Rorty, "Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger," in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.97.
- <sup>230</sup> John Keats, *Letter, Sunday* [21 Dec. 1817] [academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/keatsltr.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/keatsltr.html)

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- <sup>231</sup> Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.74.
- <sup>232</sup> Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualization" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.99.
- <sup>233</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.192.
- <sup>234</sup> Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.218.
- <sup>235</sup> Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.75.
- <sup>236</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.194.
- <sup>237</sup> Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.75.
- <sup>238</sup> *ibid.* 75.
- <sup>239</sup> Richard Rorty, "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.62.
- <sup>240</sup> *ibid.*176.
- <sup>241</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.360.
- <sup>242</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.366.
- <sup>243</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.370.
- <sup>244</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.371.
- <sup>245</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.377.
- <sup>246</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.378.
- <sup>247</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.189.
- <sup>248</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Community" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.44.
- <sup>249</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.189.
- <sup>250</sup> Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualization" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.93
- <sup>251</sup> Richard Rorty, "Non-reductive Physicalism" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.123.
- <sup>252</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.373.
- <sup>253</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.111.
- <sup>254</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.25.
- <sup>255</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.2.
- <sup>256</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.5.
- <sup>257</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.55.
- <sup>258</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.6.
- <sup>259</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.35.
- <sup>260</sup> Rene Descartes, *Sixth Meditation*.
- <sup>261</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.3.
- <sup>262</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Pataphysics," trans. by Drew Burk.



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<sup>263</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.119.

<sup>264</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.119.

<sup>265</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Holograms," trans. by Sheila Glaser. [www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulation-11-holograms.html](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulation-11-holograms.html)

<sup>266</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.122.

<sup>267</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.142.

<sup>268</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.141.

<sup>269</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.148.

<sup>270</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Holograms," trans. by Sheila Glaser.

<sup>271</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.151 – 152.

<sup>272</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.137.

<sup>273</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.137.

# Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings

## Part Two

Ian Kluge

In this portion of the paper, we shall compare the ideas presented by the forerunners of postmodernism and their most important successors and the Bahá'í Writings in order to demonstrate that surface similarities notwithstanding, the foundational ideas of postmodernism and the Writings are incompatible.

### 11. The Counter-Enlightenment and the Bahá'í Writings

In regards to reason, the Writings adopt a position that is neither in agreement with the Enlightenment's unquestioning faith in reason nor with the scepticism and even rejection of reason by the Counter-Enlightenment and its post-modern protégés. To be precise, the Writings exemplify a position that may be described as "moderate rationalism", according to which reason can give us some but not all knowledge; there are kinds of knowledge – such as the knowledge available to the heart<sup>1</sup> – which are not obtainable by reason alone but are, so-to-speak, 'trans-rational.' (We say 'trans-rational' rather than 'irrational' because this knowledge is not opposed to reason per se but goes beyond it making use, for example, of revelation.) Therefore, we must remember that "the human spirit, *unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities.*"<sup>2</sup> In other words, there are truths which cannot be discovered by unassisted or natural reason and which must be attained by other means, i.e. revelation and the development of "spiritual susceptibilities."<sup>3</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

If he [man] attains rebirth while in the world of nature, he will become informed of the divine world. *He will observe that another and a higher world exists.*<sup>4</sup>

Reason expands or transcends its limits if those employing it become spiritualized. In a further note regarding the limits of reason and knowledge, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.*<sup>5</sup>

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that rational knowledge is limited to qualities and that essences must be known by way of qualities; they cannot be known by direct insight or intuition but must be known indirectly through the mediation of qualities or attributes. This statement guides, i.e. limits our use of reason and our inquiry by saying not only that whatever we know about things and their essences, must come by way of qualities but also that whatever we know is limited to what qualities can tell us. The essences of things may have many other aspects which are not observable by us in our current state of being, and, therefore, must remain 'mysterious.' This has enormous ontological consequences not the least of which is that it safeguards the ontological integrity of all created things and provides a rational foundation for a belief in 'mysteries.' (God, for example is a 'mystery' insofar as He is beyond the comprehension of human reason.<sup>6</sup>) . In short, reason can tell us a great deal but not everything we need to know and live well.

In addition to limitations of scope and applicability, reason has the limit of fallibility. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "the circle of this [rational] knowledge is very limited because it depends upon effort and attainment."<sup>7</sup> Anything depending on human action is subject to errors of all kinds; thus, by itself, it has limited reliability and therefore, does not always lead us to the truth.<sup>8</sup> According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the conflicting opinions among the philosophers clearly demonstrate that "the method of reason is not perfect."<sup>9</sup>

However, unlike the Counter-Enlightenment and its postmodern successors, the Bahá'í Writings do not reject reason altogether, but, quite to the contrary, encourage us to use it while keeping its limitations in mind. The Writings not only inform us of the limitations of reason but also, at the same time, endorse reason and its role in our lives. Such an endorsement of reason is clear when 'Abdu'l-Bahá, says "in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason."<sup>10</sup> and

[God] has bestowed upon [man] the power of intellect so that through the attribute of reason, when fortified by the Holy Spirit, he may penetrate and discover ideal realities and become informed of the mysteries of the world of significances. As this power to penetrate the ideal knowledge is superhuman, supernatural, man becomes the collective center of spiritual as well as material forces so that the divine spirit may manifest itself in his being ...<sup>11</sup>

Through reason “fortified by the Holy Spirit,” we may obtain knowledge of the “ideal realities” i.e. the supernatural or spiritual realities of creation insofar as such knowledge is compatible with our human nature. Hence this knowledge is “superhuman.” This assurance that reason is able to attain genuine knowledge is important because that is precisely something denied by the Counter-Enlightenment and its postmodern successors. Both reject the ‘privileged’ status that reason has over ‘other ways of knowing’ and in particular its ‘privileged’ connection to truth. The link between rationality and truth has been severed.

The enormous positive importance of reason in the Writings is also seen in that the essential feature that distinguishes humankind from animals, the *differentia*, is the “rational soul.”<sup>12</sup>

The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names--the human spirit and the rational soul--designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings. But the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities.<sup>13</sup>

Here we observe not only identification of our essential identifying feature with the rational soul but also, again, emphasis on the rational soul's ability to attain genuine knowledge in the world, and, with the assistance of the “spirit of faith” or “Holy Spirit”, knowledge of “heavenly realities.” Once more, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá draws our attention to the intimate connection between rationality and obtaining knowledge or discovering truth. Elsewhere ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says that the rational soul or “the human spirit consists of the rational, or logical,

reasoning faculty, which apprehends general ideas and things intelligible and perceptible."<sup>14</sup> Through the power of reason we can discover the "realities of things."<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, there is continuous emphasis in the Writings on the use of reason to reconcile science and religion and to ground faith: "if a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation."<sup>16</sup>

For God has endowed us with faculties by which we may comprehend the realities of things, contemplate reality itself. If religion is opposed to reason and science, faith is impossible; and when faith and confidence in the divine religion are not manifest in the heart, there can be no spiritual attainment.<sup>17</sup>

There are two matters of interest in these quotes. First, is the assurance that through the use of reason and other faculties, we are capable of discovering truths about the "realities of things," i.e. the way things really are. Second, it is clear that reason and "spiritual attainment" are intimately connected i.e. reason is necessary to genuine spiritual life and faith. In addition, we are told that "religion must be in conformity with science and reason, so that it may influence the hearts of men."<sup>18</sup> Here, too, we observe that reason is not only necessary for genuine spirituality through its influence on the heart, and through it, faith.

Religion must be reasonable. If it does not square with reason, it is superstition and without foundation. It is like a mirage, which deceives man by leading him to think it is a body of water. God has endowed man with reason that he may perceive what is true. If we insist that such and such a subject is not to be reasoned out and tested according to the established logical modes of the intellect, what is the use of the reason which God has given man?<sup>19</sup>

In a similar vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that "true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond."<sup>20</sup> Yet again we observe that reason, religion, science and reality are all intimately, i.e. indissolubly connected and are not necessarily in conflict.

Finally, it should be noted that notwithstanding the possibility of error, reason can also provide us with knowledge of the truth, something that is denied by all postmodernists

from Nietzsche on; indeed, as we have seen, Nietzsche and his postmodern successors deny that there is such a thing as 'truth' to be found. Rather truth is something we make or construct. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

God has created man in order that he may *perceive the verity of existence and endowed him with mind or reason to discover truth*. Therefore, scientific knowledge and religious belief must be conformable to the analysis of this divine faculty in man.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere he says, "God has created man and endowed him with the power of reason whereby he may arrive at valid conclusions."<sup>22</sup> In other words, in spite of the possibility of error, reason is one way of attaining truth.

From the foregoing discussion, we may conclude that unlike the Counter-Enlightenment, Nietzsche and his postmodern protégés for whom there are no truths but only interpretation,<sup>23</sup> the Writings maintain that reason does, indeed, provide us with genuine knowledge of the truth despite the fact that we may use it incorrectly. It must be used carefully, preferably under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we have seen in a number of previous quotations.<sup>24</sup> In other words, one of the conditions for ensuring that reason works correctly is divine assistance. Another such condition is given in the following quote:

Consequently, it has become evident that the four criteria or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate. All of them are liable to mistake and error in conclusions. But a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of judgment and found to be complete *When we apply but one test, there are possibilities of mistake*. This is self-evident and manifest."<sup>25</sup>

When we view these quotations together, in addition to the warnings about the fallibility of human reason, we find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Writings exemplify not only 'moderate rationalism' but also a position known as "reliabilism." According to the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, reliabilism is "the position that "a belief can be

justified if formed as the result of a reliable process even if the believer is unaware of what makes it justified.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, reliabilism demands that belief be “the result of some reliable process of belief-formation.”<sup>27</sup> The Writings tells us that a “reliable process of belief formation” involves, ideally, the Holy Spirit, but at the very least, the congruence of several tests among which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá lists empirical sense knowledge, reason, tradition and the “promptings of the heart” which we interpret as the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the Writings do not go into all the technical details of reliabilism, but they do, quite clearly adumbrate this position which is for us to work out within the guidelines provided.

The inescapable conclusion to which we are led is that while the Writings do not accept the Enlightenment’s unquestioning trust in reason, neither do they accept the categorical rejection of reason exemplified by the Counter-Enlightenment and its postmodern successors. Indeed, in their emphasis on the importance of reason in science and religion, as well as in the identification of humankind’s essence as a “rational soul,” the Writings demonstrate strong leanings in favour of the Enlightenment. Philosophically, they may be seen as a continuation of the Enlightenment albeit it in an amended and corrected form.

## 12. The Bahá'í Writings and Kant

In regards to Kant, the Bahá'í Writings, cannot accept his rejection of metaphysics *tout court* since they do not accept the idea that under any and all circumstances, reason is necessarily confined to the phenomenal realm. According to Kant, we cannot correctly reason from the phenomenal to the noumenal or transcendent because the laws and conditions of reasoning do not apply to the noumenal world. These laws and conditions – for example time, space, causality, quantity, relation, quality and modality – are imposed by the human mind on the ‘raw’ data from the noumenal realm and, thereby, make thinking and reasoning possible.<sup>28</sup> However, the categories are not inherently part of the transcendent noumenal realm, from which it follows that reason does not apply to this realm of which we have no experience as it is in itself, i.e. unshaped by us. Because God is transcendent to the phenomenal realm, we cannot devise proofs of His existence by way of the phenomenal world.

As we shall see below, the Bahá'í Writings do not agree that the existence of God cannot be proven from the phenomenal

realm. This is made evident, for example, by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's proof of God as the First Cause.

Such process of causation goes on, 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. This Universal Reality cannot be sensed, it cannot be seen. It must be so of necessity, for it is All-Embracing, not circumscribed, and such attributes qualify the effect and not the cause.<sup>29</sup>

In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's view, a First Cause is necessary because no actually real chain of causation can go on infinitely. He does not say why, nor is it important for us at this point, to know why he reached this conclusion. What is germane to our discussion is that he clearly accepts the possibility of reasoning our way to an "Ultimate Cause" and "Universal Reality [that] cannot be sensed" i.e. is beyond the phenomenal realm. Moreover, he does so on the basis of causality, which he regards as a real feature of the universe and not merely an imposition by the human mind on raw noumenal data. Since causality is ontologically real, and infinite causal chains are "manifestly absurd," we must eventually find a First Cause to set the chain of causes into motion.

For the reasons given above, Kant would not accept as legitimate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "all beings and all existences are the centers from which the glory of God is reflected - that is to say, the signs of the Divinity of God are apparent in the realities of things and of creatures."<sup>30</sup> If this statement were accepted, then we would be able to use the signs of God to reason our way from the phenomenal to the noumenal and transcendent Source. Similarly, Kant is bound to reject the claim that "the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker."<sup>31</sup> Here, in this compressed version of Intelligent Design, we observe reasoning from the created to the Creator which is precisely what Kant forbids.

It might be argued that the Writings could agree with Kant as far as the limits of natural reason, i.e. reason unassisted by the Holy Spirit are concerned. Without such assistance, individuals will not develop their "spiritual susceptibilities,"<sup>32</sup> and their thinking, therefore, remains confined to the phenomenal realm. However, the Writings do not take such a position. For example, the argument to the First Cause cited above needs



nothing other than natural reason to make its point; indeed, the same argument was already used by Aristotle and other philosophers. No divine inspiration is needed to see why an initial Cause is necessary. Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's other argument from the contingency and dependency of creation and humankind to the transcendent non-contingent Source is also available to natural reason without divine assistance, as is his argument from the imperfections of all created things to the existence of a perfect Being.<sup>33</sup> In light of these arguments it is more accurate to say that according to the Writings, natural reason is sufficient for some kinds and levels of knowledge but not for others which require the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Nor do the Writings endorse Kant's belief that the phenomenal world in which we live is entirely a human construction, i.e. the way the categories of the mind organise data from the noumenal realm according to time, space and causality for example. Nature – which is what we must interpret and work with – is made by God Who provides its various inherent qualities, essences, potentialities and laws. This nature pre-exists us and therefore does not depend on us for its existence and/or attributes. It is given to us, with all things having their natural attributes and behaving according to pre-existing natural laws decreed by God from which no being except man may deviate.<sup>34</sup> In other words, unlike the philosophy of Kant, the Bahá'í Writings do not teach that humankind has any part in the process of constituting natural reality, i.e. the phenomenal realm in which we live. One could argue that making such a claim is, in effect, setting oneself up as a kind of second god and co-creator, or 'partner'.

And now concerning thy reference to the existence of two Gods. *Beware, beware, lest thou be led to join partners with the Lord*, thy God. He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal ... He hath assigned no associate unto Himself in His Kingdom, no counsellor to counsel Him ... To this every atom of the universe beareth witness, and beyond it the inmates of the realms on high ...<sup>35</sup>

These words suggest that humankind has no part in this process of constituting natural reality, i.e. no part in constituting the phenomenal realm in which we live. We may, of course, interpret the divinely constituted reality in various ways, and, of course, we may invent and construct all sorts of things – machines, laws, social codes, art and so on – using first nature, but these interpretations and constructions are not

prior to and should not be confused with the divinely created reality itself. In other words, reality as created and constituted by God, i.e. 'first nature,' should not be confused with what humankind makes from 'first nature' i.e. an artificial 'second nature', a society and civilization which we create and constitute according to our wills guided by revelation. To some extent, our wills can constitute the second nature but only to the limits allowed by the attributes inherent in the things that God has created. Fire is inherently hot<sup>36</sup> and will not serve as ice.

Thus, the Bahá'í Writings clearly recognise a distinction between first and second nature, something which is highly problematical with Kant. We might consider the noumenal to be the first nature and the phenomenal the second nature, but this is dubious at best since the phenomenal, for Kant, includes everything that is shaped by such categories as causality, quantity, existence and relation, i.e. the entire natural world. According to the Writings, however, this phenomenal realm is precisely the nature that is created by God and which humankind interprets and uses to build second nature, i.e. societies, laws, conventions, art and science within the limits defined by the divinely established first nature. The natural tendency of Kant's philosophy is to deny the distinction between the two natures and, thereby, set the stage for the postmodernist rejection of this distinction.

### 13. The Bahá'í Writings and Nietzsche

Although one may find individual ideas wherein Nietzsche and the Bahá'í Writings agree, a survey of his work makes it abundantly clear that the disagreements are fundamental and wide-spread. Let us begin with their sharply divergent assessments of Socrates and the use of reason in scientific discovery. The Writings praise Socrates as one of the philosophers who recognised the reality of the spiritual

The philosophers of Greece--such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and others--were devoted to the investigation of both natural and spiritual phenomena. In their schools of teaching they discoursed upon the world of nature as well as the supernatural world ... Because they were interested in both natural and divine philosophy, furthering the development of the physical world of mankind as well as the intellectual, they rendered *praiseworthy service to humanity*. This was the reason of the triumph and survival of their teachings and principles.<sup>37</sup>

Nietzsche, as we have already seen, disparaged Socrates as the “theoretical man”<sup>38</sup> and “mystagogue of science”<sup>39</sup> who foolishly believed that reason could explain and tell us the truth about reality.<sup>40</sup> Instead, Nietzsche wants to escape beyond “the eternal reason-spider and reason cobweb”<sup>41</sup> so that we may be free to live with our fullest passionate capacity of our will-to-power.

Unlike Nietzsche, the Writings hold that recognising the supernatural, the transcendent or divine is an important contribution to our existence. Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous section on the Enlightenment, the Writings also disagree with Nietzsche’s decisively negative assessment of reason. After all, of course, they identify humankind’s distinguishing characteristic, its *differentia*, as the “rational soul.”<sup>42</sup> They do not, of course, uncritically accept reason as the final authority on all issues, but, in their moderate rationalism and reliabilism they accept reason as a legitimate source of real knowledge. In other words, the Writings accept reason as a means of discovering truth about reality, and could not accept Nietzsche’s belief that “‘Truth’ is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created.”<sup>43</sup> Nor can they accept his sweeping statement that truth is no more than

[a] mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.<sup>44</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings recognise that what Nietzsche describes may sometimes be the case – as in the gradual degeneration of religious teachings to the point when a new Manifestation is needed – but they do not hold that this is what truth-claims always and necessarily are. Some truth-claims such as ‘God exists’ are simply correct and others are plainly wrong: the earth is not a flat disk but a sphere. Distinguishing between real truth and man-made fictions is the very basis of progress i.e. addition and improvement of knowledge, both in the sciences and in progressive revelation. Both of these involve the overcoming of error and superstition which the Writings also recognise as real – but which are problematic for Nietzsche. If truth is invented fiction, then how can we tell a ‘true fiction’ from a ‘false one’? How can we ever progress from ‘false’ to ‘true’? Indeed, in a statement that exemplifies an extreme sceptical attitude

towards truth, Nietzsche writes, "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value of life is ultimately decisive."<sup>45</sup> What is essential about truth is not that it is true but that it serves life or our life purposes: "[t]he criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power."<sup>46</sup> In other words, truth is not which is actually the case but that which meets our needs in the struggles of life – a view of truth that is highly subjective and which allows there to be as many truths as there are individuals with needs.

The Writings, for their part, maintain that truths are discovered, not invented and show no sign of accepting Nietzsche's extremely subjective characterization of truth.

God has created man in order that he may perceive the verity of existence and endowed him *with mind or reason to discover truth*. Therefore, scientific knowledge and religious belief must be conformable to the analysis of this divine faculty in man.<sup>47</sup>

Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he *discovers the constitution of things*, and through this he commands the forces of Nature; all the inventions he has made are due to his *discovery of the constitution of things*.<sup>48</sup>

He also states,

*The mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths*, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. This thought has a foundation. But many things come to the mind of man which are like the waves of the sea of imaginations; they have no fruit, and no result comes from them.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, we may conclude that although they the Writings recognise the inherent limitations of unaided reason, they do not share Nietzsche's extreme scepticism about discovering knowledge. Therefore, they place a high value on science as a means of discovering truth and not as a provider of comforting illusions<sup>50</sup> as does Nietzsche. Finally, there is no evidence that the Bahá'í Writings would accept Nietzsche's reduction of 'truth' to the will-to-power without any genuine epistemological content or truth value; "It [truth] is a word for the 'will-to-power.'" <sup>51</sup>. This, and his claim that truth is created,

i.e. an aesthetic theory of truth, is incompatible with Bahá'í epistemology which holds to a correspondence theory of truth in which truth is discovered.<sup>52</sup> The correspondence theory of truth, i.e. the theory that we attain truth when our conceptions correspond with reality is illustrated in the following:

for the connection which exists between the reality of things, *whether they be spiritual or material*, requires that when the mirror is clear and faces the sun, the light of the sun must become apparent in it.<sup>53</sup>

"The mirror of the reality of man"<sup>54</sup> reflects realities "whether they be spiritual or material" and, through this process of reflection, learns about them and if its concepts adequately represent the various realities. If they do, then they correspond to one degree or another to reality; and if they do not, we shall (hopefully) discover we are in error. This theory is also an example of 'representationalism' insofar as our concepts represent reality in our minds. For Nietzsche (as for all postmodernist philosophers), this is problematical because this not only undermines the theory that truth is created or constructed but also implies that language is capable of putting us into touch with reality. This would limit human creativity and freedom in the construction of reality.

In regards to the "will-to-power", it should also be noted that it should not be understood as simply the actualization of our inherent potentials. Even the most cursory survey of Nietzsche's statements on the will-to-power make it clear that he thinks of it in terms of overcoming and dominating others, or being unrestrained by normal moral codes. That is why he mocks Christian and other religious moralities as "slave morality"<sup>55</sup> because they have given up this goal. is emphasized by his use of the word "Macht" instead of "Kraft" or energy for power. "Macht" in German implies domination, overcoming and power over others and we must never lose sight of the fact that Nietzsche wrote of a "Wille-zur-Macht" not a "Wille-zur-Kraft." This is important because the term "will-to-power" is central in Nietzsche's philosophy and sets a tone that is fundamentally out of harmony with the Writings which emphasize love.

Nietzsche's doctrine of the "eternal return."<sup>56</sup> is also profoundly out of harmony with the Writings for two main reasons. First, it denies the existence of a transcendent dimension to reality, pre-figuring thereby, postmodernism's rejection of any form of transcendence whether it be an

ontological denial of realms beyond the material or an epistemological denial of a 'real' world that transcends or is external to our constructions. The Bahá'í teachings about the reality of an absolutely transcendent God, the immortality of the soul and its advance into "spiritual heavenly worlds,"<sup>57</sup> or the "spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion,"<sup>58</sup> or the Concourse of High, demonstrate that any rejection of ontological transcendence is not compatible with the Writings. Furthermore, in his startling and flamboyant claim that "God is dead"<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche does not merely reject an outmoded vision of the Christian God, but also expresses his opposition to recognition of any transcendent being or realm of being because those would detract from valuing earth and life on earth.. Acceptance of the transcendent will make us 'naysayers" to the value of earthly, phenomenal, material life. The epistemological denial of a real world that transcends or is outside our constructions is also problematical. The correspondence theory of truth to which the Writings adhere requires there be a real world to which we can refer our constructions, and if need be correct them.

The second reason Nietzsche's "eternal return" clashes with the Writings is because this doctrine runs counter to nature. According to Nietzsche,

all things eternally return, and ourselves with them, and that we have already existed times without number, and all things with us ... But the plexus of causes returneth in which I am intertwined,--it will again create me! I myself pertain to the causes of the eternal return. I come again with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent--NOT to a new life, or a better life, or a similar life: *I come again eternally to this identical and selfsame life*, in its greatest and its smallest, to teach again the eternal return of all things<sup>60</sup>

Nietzsche sees the eternal return as a sign of hope and a call to live heroically, but the Writings clearly reject it for the same reasons they reject incarnation. First,

reincarnation, which is the repeated appearance of the same spirit with its former essence and condition in this same world of appearance, is impossible and unrealizable.<sup>61</sup>

The repetition in the eternal return and reincarnation is of the same kind, a return of the same soul to the same conditions

without end. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá this cannot take place because human existence is not confined to material creation:

The idea that existence is restricted to this perishable world, and the denial of the existence of divine worlds, originally proceeded from the imaginations of certain believers in reincarnation; but the divine worlds are infinite. If the divine worlds culminated in this material world, creation would be futile.<sup>62</sup>

Nietzsche's eternal return denies the transcendent, non-material, dimension of existence and requires that we live in only one world, the world of physical creation within which we shall be eternally re-cycled without undergoing any evolutionary process and progress in other realms. In this statement 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that without such transcendent realms, creation itself would have no purpose or meaning if it were limited to material existence. Furthermore, he challenges Nietzsche's idea that the eternal return is a glorious and inspiring vision by calling such a vision of life limited to the material plane "futile."

The eternal return is also contrary to nature, for, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

The point of the compass in describing a circle makes no retrograde motion, for this would be contrary to the natural movement and the divine order ... and a movement contrary to the system and law of nature is the cause of nonexistence. The return of the soul after death is *contrary to the natural movement, and opposed to the divine system*.<sup>63</sup>

These statements make it clear that Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return which is so central to his philosophy, is fundamentally incompatible with the Bahá'í Writings because such a return violates the naturally progressive essence of the soul. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "with the human soul, there is no decline. Its only movement is towards perfection; growth and progress alone constitute the motion of the soul."<sup>64</sup> To return to this current material state is simply unnatural.

There are also serious difficulties in reconciling the Writings with Nietzsche's perspectivism. A superficial examination of the Writings might lead us to conclude that they support Nietzsche's perspectivism but this is a mirage. Nietzsche's perspectivism (and the perspectivism adopted by the postmodernists) does not recognise that there does in fact exist

a privileged point of view, an objective 'Archimedean point,' a transcendental vantage point from which to judge and evaluate our various individual perspectives and interpretations. This, of course, is the viewpoint of the Manifestation of God and His appointed interpreters. Whatever perspectives and interpretations we espouse must not reject or, at the very least, not contradict what the Manifestation teaches and what His specifically appointed successors decree. Nietzsche's philosophy, is incapable of recognizing the existence of such a Being, Whose "Book itself is the "Unerring Balance" established amongst men"<sup>65</sup> by which all other views and perspectives are to be judged. In reflecting on this we should not make the mistake of confusing Nietzsche's 'Super-man' or 'Ueber-mensch' with a Manifestation. The 'Super-man' is a thoroughly human entity whereas the Manifestation occupies a unique ontological position in which He has "the station of essential unity ... [and] the station of distinction"<sup>66</sup> which is limited to the created world. Moreover, the Manifestation in one station has an ontological position transcendent to the material world - something that Nietzsche's philosophy is bound to reject as an example of hostility to this life in this particular world. Nothing in Nietzsche's doctrine of the 'Super-man' provides him with any remotely similar ontological attributes.

#### 14. Commentary on the Bahá'í Writings and Heidegger

As we recall, Heidegger thought that metaphysics - "the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution and structure of reality,"<sup>67</sup> - had gone astray, and lost the "question of Being,"<sup>68</sup> replacing it with concern for particular *beings*. In other words, metaphysics or, more precisely, western metaphysics, replaced a concern for Being with a concern for particular entities or instantiations of being. In his introduction to *Being and Time*, he says, " 'Being' cannot indeed be conceived as an entity ... nor can 'Being' be derived from higher concepts by definition, not can it be presented through lower ones."<sup>69</sup> It is also impossible to define Being in the manner of "traditional logic."<sup>70</sup> For Heidegger,

Metaphysics thinks about beings as beings. Wherever the question is asked what beings are, beings as such are in sight. Metaphysical representation owes this sight to the light of Being. The light itself, i.e., that which such thinking experiences as light, does not come within the range of metaphysical thinking; for- metaphysics always



represents beings only as beings.<sup>71</sup>

To continue Heidegger's metaphor, we may say that metaphysics no longer looks at the light (of Being) by which we see all things but only at what the light reveals and, therefore, comes to forget Being. "Metaphysics, insofar as it always represents only beings as beings, does not recall Being itself. Philosophy does not concentrate on its ground."<sup>72</sup> In other words, metaphysics concentrates on the surface phenomena and forgets that which makes the surface phenomena possible, the condition of their being-there [Da-sein].

In our view, the Writings do not agree with Heidegger that the concern for "beings as beings," i.e. for specific entities, necessarily leads to a forgetfulness of Being. It may do so, but such a result is not necessary. To understand how this can be so, we must come to grips with the fact that the Bahá'í Writings abound with metaphysical statements and analysis about the nature and structure of reality including that of all kinds of beings. The Writings make wide-spread and consistent use of the Aristotelian method, terminology and arguments in their analysis of reality. In the Aristotelian analysis of reality, there are substances<sup>73</sup> which have essential and non-essential attributes; there are essences with necessary and accidental attributes; there are potentials in each entity; things are contingent or necessary, there are four causes (material, final, formal and efficient) and all materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. There is also a First Mover or God Who is "the object of desire"<sup>74</sup> for all things and towards Whom all things are attracted. All of these concepts are found and used in the Writings.<sup>75</sup> In addition, metaphysical arguments of various kinds - for immortality, against re-incarnation, against materialism, pantheism and the belief that the world is an illusion - are also employed.

This leads to an important question: given their wealth of metaphysical analysis, do the Bahá'í Writings 'forget' Being? Does Heidegger's statement that "It [metaphysics] refers to Being and means beings as beings"<sup>76</sup> also apply to the Writings? In our view, the answer is negative because the Bahá'í doctrine of the essential unknowability of God's Essence:

Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and

will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. "No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving."<sup>77</sup>

Precisely because God cannot be known in His Essence - a belief which is emphasized throughout the Bahá'í Writings - we cannot make God into another particular being subject to definitions and "traditional logic."<sup>78</sup> All the specific images of God as an entity are no more than products of our own individual and/or collective imaginations, or heuristic images provided by Manifestations for a particular time and place. These images are not real although they serve a heuristic purpose that both facilitates and limits our thoughts and feelings at the same time. If understood correctly, they draw attention to the utterly transcendent which does not exist as a being 'like any other' and prevent us from forgetting Being completely.

In other words, if we keep God's unknowability foremost in mind, we shall not mistake a being for Being. Since God's Essence is unknowable, we can only observe the "signs of God" (presence of God.) in all created things.<sup>79</sup> To use Heidegger's metaphor, since we cannot look at the sun, we can still become aware of the light and how that light is received by individual beings. Through reflective prayer guided by the Manifestation, we can still be aware of the light by which we see and its Source: "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it."<sup>80</sup> It is precisely Bahá'u'lláh's revelation with its emphasis on the unknowability of God that ensures we do not forget That which is the very condition for our being and knowing.

Because the Bahá'í Writings avoid the metaphysical trap of mistaking Being for 'a being' and, forgetting Being, Bahá'ís can agree with Heidegger's analogy between Being and colour:

Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyse it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. it causes every merely calculating importunity to turn to a destruction ... The earth appears only cleared and as itself when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable ....<sup>81</sup>

Here we see the ineluctability of God or Being, the "generous,"<sup>82</sup> Who "wants only to shine" and on Whom all

beings depend for their existence. However, as with colour, the moment we begin analysis we lose the very thing we seek to analyse; propositional knowledge and calculative and technological reasoning is of no use in understanding Being. Indeed, the truest thing we can say about God or Being is that it is utterly transcendent and “undisclosable.”

Our conclusion is that on the fundamental issue, the Bahá'í Writings both agree and disagree. They agree with Heidegger insofar as Being or God is absolutely beyond human conception and that all our concepts are deficient in this regard. However, the Writings also show that the doctrine of the unknowability of God's Essence is the antidote needed to prevent metaphysics from diminishing God into a being ‘like the others.’ This disagreement is fundamental insofar as there is no way to bridge Heidegger's rejection of metaphysics and the Writings' use of them.

At this point an extremely thorny problem intrudes. Is there any correspondence between the Bahá'í concept of God and Heidegger's concept of Being? Heidegger's views varied over his career. In his first major work, *Being and Time*, we observe “little interest in the idea that being [Being] is the ground of beings.”<sup>83</sup> “Later, being [Being] is the ground of being ... ‘being offers us no ground and basis on which we build and in which we dwell – as do the beings to which we turn. Being is the nay-saying [Ab-sage] to the role of such grounding...’”<sup>84</sup> Not surprisingly, there has been considerable discussion of Heidegger's alleged atheism – but this has not hindered theistic views of his work from appearing in large numbers. We are in no position to engage in this highly complex debate here. However, we must not overlook the fact that Heidegger's lack of clarity on this issue contrasts sharply with the Writings which see the recognition of God has the first and most essential duty of humankind: “I bear witness O my God, that Thou has created me to know Thee and to worship Thee...” Any vacillation or lack of absolute clarity on this issue is in conflict with the Bahá'í Writings.

Another area of serious disagreement between Heidegger and the Writings is his unqualified rejection of the correspondence theory of truth: “truth has by no means the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the Object).”<sup>85</sup> He also writes, “In what way is this relation [of correspondence] possible as a relation between *intellectus* [mind/intellect] and *res* [thing/object]?”<sup>86</sup> Heidegger has no

confidence in the mind's ability to form concepts that correspond to or are adequate to reality.

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the correspondence theory of truth is valid insofar as it can provide genuine and adequate knowledge in its appropriate sphere of action. It cannot, for example, apply to 'knowledge' of God Who is unknowable in his essence; not can it apply to the direct or immediate knowledge of the essence of things. The appropriate sphere of human knowledge is whatever can be known by the qualities or attributes of a thing.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the Writings disagree with Heidegger's complete rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. On this issue, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes,

Reflect that man's power of thought consists of two kinds. *One kind is true, when it agrees with a determined truth. Such conceptions find realization in the exterior world; such are accurate opinions, correct theories, scientific discoveries and inventions.*

The other kind of conceptions is made up of vain thoughts and *useless ideas which yield neither fruit nor result, and which have no reality.* No, they surge like the waves of the sea of imaginations, and they pass away like idle dreams.<sup>88</sup>

He says a thought or concept is true "when it agrees with a determined truth," and describes "conceptions [that] find their realization in the exterior world" as "*accurate opinions, correct theories, scientific discoveries and inventions.*" Clearly these are references to correspondence between our ideas and reality. On the other hand, "useless ideas" or concepts which "have no reality" and therefore produce no results obviously do not correspond to reality. Moreover, the action of overcoming and correcting mistakes and learning to which the Writings refer obviously require bringing our conceptions into correspondence with reality. Finally, the Writings clearly believe in scientific progress, and that, in turn, depends on ever-improving correspondence between our concepts and the things we study; our knowledge gains in accuracy, scope, explanatory and predictive power and opens hidden aspects of reality that allow us to make new discoveries and inventions. If our knowledge did not correspond to reality, this would not be possible. Conversely, the Writings assert the existence of error, ignorance and superstition. In other words, there are beliefs that do not correspond to reality, and these must be corrected.

Heidegger also doubts the ability of language, or

propositions to convey the whole truth about things: "the traditional assignment of truth exclusively to statements as the sole essential locus of truth falls away. Truth does not originally reside in the proposition."<sup>89</sup> In other words, there are truths about things that cannot be adequately conveyed in language. Heidegger doubts that mere verbal propositions lacking proper grounding in a relationship to Being can ever satisfactorily correspond to real specific beings. The Bahá'í Writings agree with him on this point, albeit it with serious qualifications. We observe the boundaries of what words can say, for example when 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the full meaning of first chapter of John in the *Bible* ("In the beginning ... ") is "beyond the power of books or words to contain and express."<sup>90</sup> Obviously, there are limits to humankind's powers of comprehension and explanation. However, while language and propositions have their limitations, they are not as incapable of reflecting reality as Heidegger seems to think. There is no absolute disconnect between language and all aspects of reality. If there were, the Writings would not be able to endorse the concept of progress i.e. improvements in accuracy, scope, explanatory and predictive power, in scientific understanding or in many other human endeavours. For progress to occur, true propositions about reality must reflect reality with some degree of accuracy.

Nonetheless, the Writings agree with Heidegger insofar as a proper relationship to and understanding of Being is necessary to acquire a fully adequate knowledge of particular beings. Heidegger writes,

it becomes plain that to clarify the structure of a truth it is not enough simply to presuppose this relational totality [of complete correspondence between mind and object] but we must go back and *inquire into the context of Being which provides the support for this totality as such.*<sup>91</sup>

In terms of the Bahá'í Writings, this means that to have the fullest possible understanding of specific beings, we also need to take Being or God into consideration, since God provides the ground for the very possibility of specific beings even coming into existence. Being or God is the condition for the existence of all things. Without a proper relationship to Being, we might, for example, degrade things to merely material objects without seeing the "signs of God" in them and think that their existence is entirely for our use. Such understanding of things would be unsatisfactory and easily leads to error. This situation is precisely why science and its propositional knowledge and religion, and its relationship to Being, must work together to

attain appropriate knowledge of things.

For the Writings, the correspondence theory of truth is valid not just of material reality but also of spiritual realities, though to comprehend these higher realities requires assistance of the Holy Spirit to develop our “spiritual susceptibilities.”<sup>92</sup> When these are developed, we can correct our ignorance of “divine religion”<sup>93</sup> and think “beyond the range of the senses”<sup>94</sup> and attain the “conscious pathway to the Kingdom of God.”<sup>95</sup> ‘Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that a person who “possesses no spiritual susceptibilities [] is uninformed of the heavenly world”<sup>96</sup>; this is another statement which implicitly posits a correspondence between our thoughts and reality. That the correspondence theory also applies to spiritual realities is seen by the close association between wisdom and the heart:

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>97</sup>

Not only does the heart attain knowledge of spiritual realities, but it is also capable of ‘thinking’ albeit it in its own way and attaining understanding: “Ponder this in thine heart, that thou mayest comprehend its meaning,”<sup>98</sup> Such exhortations to ponder things in our hearts are frequent throughout Bahá'u'lláh's Writings and indicate that the heart is capable of acquiring knowledge and understanding. However, this does not mean the knowledge attained by the heart is incompatible with the knowledge attained by reason and other ways:

If thou wishest the divine knowledge and recognition, purify thy heart from all beside God, be wholly attracted to the ideal, beloved One; search for and choose Him and apply thyself to rational and authoritative arguments. *For arguments are a guide to the path and by this the heart will be turned unto the Sun of Truth.* And when the heart is turned unto the Sun, then the eye will be opened and will recognize the Sun through the Sun itself. Then (man) will be in no need of arguments (or proofs), for the Sun is altogether independent, and absolute independence is in need of nothing, and proofs are one of the things (of which absolute independence has no need).<sup>99</sup>

In other words, arguments can clear the way for the heart's direct perception of the truth after which point, such arguments will no longer be needed. When the heart is turned to the sun,

we will understand, but we will understand in a way not mediated by propositions.

Heidegger agrees with the Writings on the issue of truth simply making itself known, through “disclosedness”<sup>100</sup> of Being and the Being of beings. Letting the Being of beings and Being itself or God unconceal itself is a higher, or more profound kind of knowledge than can be stated in propositions. This does not mean propositional knowledge is unimportant; as we see in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words above, propositional knowledge plays an essential part in the development of the heart - but it is not the ultimate knowledge we have. However, there are limits to this agreement between the Writings and Heidegger. The Writings cannot agree that the knowledge revealed by the assistance of the Holy Spirit not only reveals but also, in its inherent nature, conceals and, thereby, leads us into error. This knowledge is “infallible and indubitable ... and this is the condition in which certainty alone can be attained.”<sup>101</sup> In contrast, Heidegger says, “The disclosure of beings as such is simultaneously and intrinsically the concealing of being as a whole”<sup>102</sup> because “[i]n the simultaneity of disclosure and concealing errancy holds sway. Errancy and the concealing of what is concealed belong to the primordial essence of truth.”<sup>103</sup> The Bahá'í Writings nowhere suggest that error or “errancy” is an intrinsic part of truth itself. Our knowledge of the truth may be a mixture of truth and error but this fact does not extend to the truth in itself, i.e. “the primordial essence of truth.” Indeed, separating light “from darkness, , truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error”<sup>104</sup> is one of the reasons for the Manifestation’s appearance.

## 15. Lyotard and the Bahá'í Writings

The Bahá'í Writings and Lyotard’s postmodernism are in conflict on all fundamental points. It is impossible to embrace them both without losing logical consistency and thereby becoming hamstrung both in thought and action. One cannot both reject metanarratives and accept only small, local narratives [*petits récits*], and at the same time accept progressive revelation as the paradigm for humankind’s spiritual history and global unity as the goal of earthly evolution without completely undermining one’s own position intellectually and thereby making consistent thought and action impossible. As a metanarrative of humankind’s religious and even non-religious history, progressive revelation is integral to the identity of the Bahá'í Faith. It is the foundation on which belief in the essential

unity of all religions and of humankind is built. Any philosophy which rejects metanarratives is, for that reason alone, fundamentally at odds with the Bahá'í teachings. On the issue of metanarratives at least, the Bahá'í Writings are in the same company as Hegel, Marx, Toynbee and Sorokin to name only a few of the best-known examples of metanarratives of human history.

It is also clear that the Bahá'í Writings privilege the metanarrative revealed by the Manifestations over all other metanarratives. For our time, Bahá'u'lláh is described as the “true Physician”<sup>105</sup> Whose Book is the “infallible remedy”<sup>106</sup> that provides the vision for understanding our world as well as previous dispensations. Obviously, for the Writings, not all remedies - or metanarratives - are equally effective or true. Some are more true, or appropriate or effective than others and those presented by the Manifestations are supreme. From this it is also evident that the Bahá'í Writings reject the relativism inherent in Lyotard's thought. If all metanarratives are on par, and there is no external ‘Archimedean standpoint’ from which to judge among them, it becomes impossible to distinguish knowledge from superstition, scientific fact from fiction, divine revelation from imagination and, of course, good from evil. All differences are justified as differences of viewpoint. If no viewpoint, or, metanarrative is privileged over any other, then they are all equally valid, and this leaves us with an epistemological and moral relativism according to which we can make no objective or universal judgments about any statements.

This relativism inherent in Lyotard's philosophy is problematic for the Writings because they do not maintain that all moral positions are equal - they clearly privilege love and peace over hatred and war - nor do they assert that superstition is equal to true knowledge or that all putative physicians for mankind's ills are of equal skill. They also uphold objective and universal truths such as progressive revelation, the inability to know essences directly, the “rational soul” as humankind's distinguishing characteristic, and most importantly, the absolute existence of God. Nowhere do they suggest that contrary views on these and many other issues are equally valid as relativism is bound to maintain. The Writings are full of references to those who deny the teachings of the Manifestation as “ignorant”, in “error,” subject to “superstition,” “mistaken” and even “absurd.” By such means the Writings actively oppose the idea that all viewpoints are equally valid and that none is privileged



over any other. However, we hasten to add that the recognition that the Manifestation's teachings are privileged, does not justify a feeling or attitude of personal superiority to the other as a fellow human being. The other's view may be mistaken but s/he is still a creation of God and must be treated as such:

Necessarily there will be some who are defective amongst men, but it is our duty to enable them by kind methods of guidance and teaching to become perfected. Some will be found who are morally sick; they should be treated in order that they may be healed. Others are immature and like children; they must be trained and educated so that they may become wise and mature. Those who are asleep must be awakened; the indifferent must become mindful and attentive. But all this must be accomplished in the spirit of kindness and love and not by strife, antagonism nor in a spirit of hostility and hatred, for this is contrary to the good pleasure of God.<sup>107</sup>

Another serious conflict between Lyotard (and postmodernism in general) and the Writings is that the Writings accept various binary oppositions rejected by Lyotard as "terrorist,"<sup>108</sup> because they can be used to "eliminate[] or threaten[] to eliminate, a player [point of view, culture] from the language game [or metanarrative] one shares with them."<sup>109</sup> As we have already seen in previous sections, the Writings accept the binary opposition of 'rational' and 'irrational', and privilege the rational by stating that humankind is distinguished from animals by the "rational soul." Another such binary opposition is 'civilized' and 'uncivilized', with the former being clearly privileged as the desirable state for man. For example, in *Paris Talks*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that Mohammed raised the Arabs who were "a people as savage and uncivilized as the wild beasts"<sup>110</sup> to a higher, more civilized state. The Writings also make use of the oppositional binary 'knowledge' and 'superstition' and unhesitatingly privilege the former. 'Superstition' is always a term of opprobrium and condemnation as seen in the following statement: "It is, therefore, clear that in order to make any progress in the search after truth we must relinquish superstition."<sup>111</sup> This theme is constantly repeated in the numerous references to science and religion: "If religion does not agree with science, it is superstition and ignorance."<sup>112</sup> Quite patently, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is condemning superstition, and, in the second quote, privileging science. He wants us to overcome error, i.e. to leave behind and marginalise erroneous beliefs instead of succumbing to them.

This, of course, is not to say that the Writings accept any and all binary oppositions; oppositional binaries based on race, nationality and wealth for, example, are not acceptable and must be overcome.<sup>113</sup> We may reject and marginalise ideas but we must not marginalise individual human beings. However, the fact that the Writings accept oppositional binaries in any situation puts them in profound conflict with Lyotard's theories.

The Bahá'í Writings can only accept some aspects of Lyotard's language game theory. Language game theory, as we recall, is a development of his theory of metanarrative. Very briefly, a language game is a particular use of language, according to particular rules, and these rules vary from game to game. Science is a language game; so are religion, philosophy, literature. Every society is/has a language game. For the Writings, there is no difficulty with the idea that various cultures and subcultures have different language games and that a language game is necessary for the existence of society. However, the Writings cannot accept the claim that a universal metalanguage<sup>114</sup> cannot exist, since the revelation brought by the Manifestations may be seen as being exactly that, a universal language game or metanarrative applicable to all cultures and all human beings. The unification of humankind requires that we all agree to at least one, universal language game. This is possible because the Writings maintain that all human beings share the same human nature which is specifically characterized by the possession of a "rational soul."<sup>115</sup> The universal possession of a "rational soul" is the foundation of Bahá'í anthropology or theory of man as well as the foundation for all hopes for the unity of humankind; without a common, universal, essential human nature such unity would have nothing to build on.

According to Lyotard, language games are water-tight compartments that prohibit any critical inter-action since they use language according to different rules. There is really no possibility of sensible criticism and debate. How could the rules of tennis be used to critique the rules of soccer? Thus, unlike the Writings, Lyotard's theory, resurrected by Stephen J Gould's concept of "non-overlapping magisteria"<sup>116</sup> sees no possibility or even need for a dialogue, consensus and harmony between science and religion since they are playing different language games. From this point of view, science and religion are confined in "two solitudes"<sup>117</sup> and the goal of harmonizing them is a willow-the-wisp; they are not competitors and,

therefore, do not need harmonizing. Of course, such a view is philosophically untenable. Whether or not science and religion are two disparate language games, the fact is that at least some scientific discoveries have implications for religion and some religious teachings have implications for science. The "two solitudes" are not totally isolated and do, indeed, interact, and for that reason may be in conflict that requires harmonizing. This is further emphasised by the Bahá'í teaching that "truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different."<sup>118</sup> Since that is the case, it follows logically that we should "earnestly endeavour to be the means of uniting religion and science."<sup>119</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá advocates more than "two solitudes" that do not conflict by virtue of not communicating with each other, rather, he wants that "Religion and science walk hand in hand."<sup>120</sup>

Lyotard rejects the possibility or need for critical interaction among language games and metanarratives because he is concerned about preserving heterogeneity or diversity. This cannot be achieved if one metanarrative or language game becomes dominant and arrogantly identifies their views with reality itself and, thereby, turns "terrorist"<sup>121</sup> by excluding or otherwise silencing conflicting views.

His 'war on totality' rejects totalizing theories which he describes as master narratives [metanarratives] that are somehow reductionistic, simplistic and even 'terroristic' by providing legitimations for totalitarian terror and suppressing differences in unifying schemes.<sup>122</sup>

Instead, Lyotard wants us to recognise "the heteromorphous nature of language games,"<sup>123</sup> in order to preserve the diversity of games and metanarratives. Even freely arrived at consensus is rejected<sup>124</sup> because that is simply another way for a majority to pressure and oppress a minority and requires the surrender of the very attributes that provide a unique identity and mode of existence. Instead Lyotard "champions dissensus over consensus, diversity and dissent over conformity and consensus and heterogeneity and the incommensurable over homogeneity and universality."<sup>125</sup> This position, held in some form by all postmodernist philosophers, makes them suspicious of anything that seems likely to diminish heterogeneity by attempting to subsume differences – even if this is presented as a freely arrived at consensus – within a single, all-encompassing i.e. 'totalizing' metanarrative and language game. Because of this "irreducible pluralism"<sup>126</sup> there can be at best temporary local

arrangements (but no permanent institutions) “in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family and international domains”<sup>127</sup> that can be dissolved at any time at the behest of the ‘players.’ From this point of view, the Bahá’í teaching of “unity in diversity”<sup>128</sup> could very easily be seen as operating to suppress diversity for the sake of unity, and thereby become a recipe for “terrorism.” The concept of a ‘totalizing’ metareligion trying to unify all other religions into one by concentrating on the essential “oneness of religion”<sup>129</sup> is, from the postmodernist viewpoint, a threat to the independent existence of all other metanarratives and language games, as is the desire to establish world unity through some form of global commonwealth. Such a project inevitably requires the establishment of permanent global institutions and would thereby diminish heterogeneity in customs of governance. All would have to submit to and find their place in the metanarrative of the development of global unity. Furthermore, despite the fact that all Bahá’ís have the right and duty to investigate the truth for himself and to speak their minds freely, postmodernists like Lyotard see this principle as severely compromised and undermined by the enormous emphasis put on unity in Bahá’í community life and LSA decisions. At the personal level, the use of standardized prayer books as distinct from extemporaneous individual prayer, is a further example of control over the language game as is the existence of authorized and infallible interpreters of the Manifestation’s Word. Rather than embrace the unity provided by such limitations of the language game and metanarrative, Lyotard prefers to celebrate endless pluralities and heterogeneities for no other reason than their differences. According to him, most people have lost their interest in grand narratives.<sup>130</sup> Finally, with his emphasis on “dissensus” Lyotard is bound to be highly suspicious of the entire consultation process because it can be seen as a way to minimize diversity in the quest for consensus.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Lyotard and the Bahá’í Writings are in deep conflict. As noted at the outset of this paper, there may be some areas of minor or superficial agreement between them, but on the essential and foundational issues there is none.

## 16. The Bahá’í Writings and Derrida

As with Lyotard, the Bahá’í Writings have a considerable number of foundational differences with the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. These would preclude harmony on anything

but superficialities and incidentals. The first of these foundational differences concerns Derrida's rejection of 'privilege' in regards to knowers and knowledge.

Unlike Derrida, the Bahá'í Writings recognise the existence of privileged knowers, the Manifestations of God, Who possess "essential infallibility,"<sup>131</sup> or the "Most Great Infallibility,"<sup>132</sup> which makes it impossible for them to err in Their teaching. They are "endowed with divine knowledge, not dependent upon learning acquired in schools"<sup>133</sup> and are distinguished above all others of mankind in every aspect and qualification in order that He may be able to train effectively the human body politic, eliminate the darkness enshrouding the human world, uplift humanity from a lower to a higher kingdom.<sup>134</sup>

The knowledge of these "infallible Physician[s]"<sup>135</sup> is not just another point of view or interpretation in an endless series of such, but rather, is the standard by which all other knowledge must be assessed: "Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men."<sup>136</sup> Obviously, this Book which can only be measured by its own standard<sup>137</sup> is privileged above all other human knowledge, and, in effect, is a transcendental or Archimedean standpoint from which all other viewpoints may be evaluated. Furthermore, in the Bahá'í Dispensation there are 'Abdu'l-Bahá, an infallible interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's Word, as well as the Guardian whose interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are also infallible.<sup>138</sup> In addition, the Bahá'í Faith also recognises that the Universal House of Justice is "under the unerring guidance of God"<sup>139</sup> in its appointed sphere of operations.

The existence of these privileged knowers and interpreters is fatal to the deconstructive project because they establish an outside, transcendental privileged Archimedean standpoint from which to judge human viewpoints and, thereby, impose limits on the endless "play," self-subversion and supplementation of texts that is crucial to deconstruction. They also place boundaries within which the Writings may be understood. The problem is that such parameters deprive the deconstructionist project of its very reason for being and its *modus operandi*. An instructive example of how the presence of privileged interpreters sets constraints on our understanding of the Writings is the issue of homosexuality. Bahá'u'lláh's statements about "boys"<sup>140</sup> has been interpreted by Shoghi Effendi to mean a prohibition of homosexual behavior and relationships.<sup>141</sup> For Bahá'ís, the Guardian's understanding ends

the “play” of words, of self-subversion and of complementarities and imposes a final and authoritative meaning on what Bahá'u'lláh means. To emphasise its denial of any privileged interpreters of texts, deconstructionism rejects even the notion that the author has any privileged insight into his own creation.

In regards to the rejection of privilege, it should be noted that in distinction to Derrida, the Writings privilege one member of certain oppositional binaries such as good and evil, rational and irrational, truth and untruth, God and creation and, as we shall see, signifier and signified. In ontology they also accept such binary oppositions as substance and attribute, essential and incidental (accidental), contingent and necessary all of which deconstructionism rejects. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes,

*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>142</sup>

Very obviously, substance is completely different from attribute and is superior to it insofar as the accident or attribute depends on the substance. In the case of the human soul, the substance does not need the accidental or contingent human body to exist. In this sense, the rational soul, as substance, is privileged over the accidental, or, to put it another way, the essence is privileged over the accident.

Without privileging the substance over the accident 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not be able to establish his proof of the immortality of the soul – a key Bahá'í doctrine. And what would be the point of having a Manifestation's guidance, if we were not willing to privilege good over evil, the rational over the irrational, truth over untruth? Who would we need any guidance at all? The Writings, however, clearly state that humankind needs this guidance for its material and spiritual evolution, and, therefore, privilege good over evil, love over hatred, knowledge over ignorance, truth over lies<sup>143</sup> and, as we shall see below, the rational over the irrational. There is no question for them of reversing this order by invoking Derrida's “aporias” i.e. by invoking explanations that lie outside the standard rules of reasoning and logic.<sup>144</sup> For the Writings, there is simply no need to puzzle ourselves over the superiority of truth over ignorance and superstition and the need to overcome the latter. The same

case holds for religion. If we are not willing to privilege God over creation, by recognising God's ontological independence and primacy, then there is no possibility of having religion at all since religion requires the recognition of some original or foundational Source however it be envisioned.

Although we have already done so in our discussion of the Bahá'í Writings and the Counter-enlightenment, it is necessary to draw attention again to the privileging of reason precisely because this is so contradictory to Derrida's deconstructionism, its rejection of binary oppositions and its "aporias." It may, of course, be argued that these "aporias" represent moments of higher insight beyond the merely rational and for that reason find some resonance in the Writing's concepts of trans-rational, intuitive, 'mystical' insight gained with the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Bahá'í Faith certainly recognises these, but the situation with Derrida's "aporias" is different. Derrida's "aporias" overturn various binary oppositions in order to destabilise and un-privilege them whereas the moments of inspiration and transcendental insight confirm the Manifestation's teachings and the binary oppositions He establishes, such as, for example, the precedence of knowledge over ignorance, and love over hatred and God over creation. That said, let us turn our attention to the privileging of reason by the Bahá'í Writings.

The Bahá'í Writings, of course, do not regard human reason as infallible but they clearly privilege reason and the rational even in religion. Reason is necessary for humankind's spiritual evolution but it is not, by itself, sufficient for our spiritual development. It must be guided by the Manifestations and "fortified by the Holy Spirit"<sup>145</sup> in order to become informed of the mysteries of the world of significances"<sup>146</sup> that constitute the world of creation. Reason is privileged in Bahá'í anthropology or theory of humankind. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "[t]he human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names--the human spirit and the rational soul - designate one thing."<sup>147</sup> The fact that reason is the essential, and universal feature distinguishing man from animal is significant because this means that all human beings share this capacity and have a common, inherent nature or essence regardless of historical period, place or culture. Reason already unifies humankind in essence and can, therefore, be the foundational capacity for manifesting the unity of humankind in the phenomenal world. It can also be the basis of recognizing the essential oneness of all religions and

progressive revelation.

Reason is also necessary to faith and spiritual development, for as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation"<sup>148</sup> and "If religion is opposed to reason and science, faith is impossible; and when faith and confidence in the divine religion are not manifest in the heart, there can be no spiritual attainment."<sup>149</sup> This is an example of where the Manifestation and His appointed interpreter have dissolved a binary opposition – faith and reason – but this should not be interpreted as a blanket rejection of all such oppositions.

Privileging reason or the rational soul obviously limits our ability to fully engage in deconstructive "play" with relevant passages because we now have a privileged viewpoint or perspective from which to judge and possibly deny the validity of other ideas. We can now at least begin the process of distinguishing knowledge from superstition, rationality from irrationality, truth from error or deceptions. Once again we observe how the position adopted by the Writings undermines and effectively negates the entire deconstructive project.

The Bahá'í Writings also privilege through the agency of humankind insofar as man, whose unique identifying feature is "the rational soul" is "the highest creature of the phenomenal world."<sup>150</sup> Creation itself would have no purpose without man: "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>151</sup> Thus we can see that reason is also privileged ontologically in regards to the make-up or nature of reality by characterizing it as the distinguishing feature of God's highest creation.

Deconstruction programmatically rejects all privileging because it limits the "play" of words, subversions and supplementarities. We might say that deconstructionism rejects these binaries for 'political' reasons, insofar as privileging one term arbitrarily imposes it on the other, it imposes an order of value and importance, thereby marginalising one of them. To use Lyotard's term, privileging is "terroristic" since this imposed, authoritarian order, limits our freedom to follow the "play" of concepts. The rejection of privilege accords with deconstruction's refusal to subsume things under universal concepts such as 'human,' 'human nature' or 'species,' i.e. the refusal to recognise essences. Such universal concepts<sup>152</sup> are a form of violence and totalitarianism against the heterogeneity



of the individual. Deconstruction is supposed to free us from such conceptual oppression.

There are still other problems between Derrida and the Bahá'í Writings. To understand one of the most important, it is worth while recalling Jonathan Culler's remark that "[t]o deconstruct a discourse [text] is to show how it *undermines the philosophy it asserts*, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies..."<sup>153</sup> Given the infinite play of traces and infinite supplementarity, we can never know what a text of any kind really means. There can be no authoritative, final self-sufficient interpretation of a text because the concept of infinite supplementation means that "meaning is always deferred."<sup>154</sup> Meaning is something that simultaneously is and is not, something that never is and is always to be. It cannot be definitively established for two reasons. First, any interpretation of a text is itself subject to the "play" of traces, supplements and substitutions and thus at least as ambiguous as the original text itself. Second, the self-sufficient, essential and privileged meaning cannot be established by logical or rational means because reason depends on the principle of identity and non-contradiction: "A = A" and "A thing cannot be A and not-A in the same respect at the same time." The "play" of supplements prevents precisely that simple identification of "A" with itself; it is always "A and not-quite-A" because of the traces and supplements originating in links to the whole linguistic system. Christopher Norris' comment about literary critics is apropos to anyone reading a text by Derrida's deconstructionist method:

if interpretation is always caught up in a chain of proliferating sense which it can neither halt nor fully comprehend, then the critic [or any reader] is effectively absolved of all responsibility for limiting the play of his own imagination.<sup>155</sup>

Indeed, if the traces and supplements can ultimately extend through the entire linguistic system there is no reason to arbitrarily call a halt to interpretation. Derrida's position leads to the unavoidable conclusion no one can ever really know what a text is about since both the text and all its interpretations are constantly undermining themselves. In more general terms, there can be no knowledge at all because all knowledge is embodied in texts written or spoken and is, therefore, subject to the "play" of traces and supplements.

Derrida's position is extremely problematical for all religious texts. Why would any religious revelation endorse an

undertaking which is guaranteed to create additional and needless ambiguity to texts meant to provide guidance for human thought and action? Why would a Manifestation speak in such a way as to undermine or subvert His own meaning? Doing so would sow needless confusion and contention among people and thereby defeat the very purpose of religion which is “to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife.”<sup>156</sup> The prevention of such confusion and contention is the very reason for appointing ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as infallible interpreters. Indeed, if we take the deconstructionist project to its logical conclusion, we could never know, not even in principle, what any particular text (revealed or not) actually says since an infinite number of supplementations could lead to an infinite number of interpretations at least some of which would be in direct conflict. This may sound fine in theory but in practice it is unworkable for a religion trying to unify humankind, to explicate its teachings clearly and to engage in meaningful inter-faith dialogue.

It is difficult if not impossible to avoid concluding that Derrida's position leads to a profound and corrosive scepticism about humankind's ability to obtain and articulate knowledge. In fact, the whole concept of knowledge distinguishable from fiction, lies, pretence, error and mythology is thrown into question. Problems begin with Derrida's refusal to recognise the signifier/signified distinction. If at least some propositions and statements, i.e. signifiers do not refer to some entity or state of affairs external or transcendental to the signifier but only to the play of differences in a language system, then how can these propositions provide knowledge of the world? Derrida's theory leads to a profound disconnect between human discourse and reality, a disconnect so fundamental that it effectively denies our ability to get knowledge and communicate about the world. This position is known as scepticism. All we have, in the last analysis, are different stories, interpretations, perspectives or texts, each as valid as the next in its own way (see Lyotard's position on the validity of each language game), with none privileged over any other. Furthermore, there is no possible way to choose between accounts or texts, since there is no way for humans to attain a transcendental viewpoint, i.e. a viewpoint outside of all texts from which to make a judgment. Not only does this conflict with the Writings' acceptance of privileged knowers, but also throws into question the whole concept of progress i.e. overcoming error in favour of more accurate views in science or any other area of study. psychology or history.

Progress in science and knowledge of reality in general is an integral part of progressive revelation. Such deep scepticism also conflicts with the Writings because it undermines the concept of reason as a means of achieving progress: reason itself becomes just another perspective or method of acquiring 'knowledge' without having any privileged status. In addition, Derrida's view undermines ethics insofar as we can no longer distinguish the liar from the truthful person: if there is no independent, i.e. transcendental truth about any situation, all we have left is confused and conflicting welter of perspectives, interpretations, claims and counter-claims all of equal validity.

The Writings do not accept Derrida's view that words do not refer to a "transcendental" of some kind, i.e. to an object, person, situation, process or phenomenon that is external to a particular language. Words, according to Derrida, refer only to other words in a language and not to something else; to put it another way, there is no external, transcendental signified beyond the signifier. In the Bahá'í view, this is untenable. What would become of the word "God"? If it did not refer to an 'other' outside of language, the whole purpose of religion would be negated, as would the concept of a Manifestation of God, not to mention God's Will, or the Names of God. Religion would literally be reduced to a 'word-game' in which each word simply refers to another in an endless web of cross-references. Prayer, especially petitionary prayer would lose their rationale and purpose, as, for example, the Noonday prayer with its daily rededication of ourselves to "know [God] and to worship [Him]."<sup>157</sup> What be the point of testifying to "[our] powerless and Thy might"<sup>158</sup> if there was nothing external and transcendental to us Whose power we are recognising? The same would be true of the Writings' ontological statements such as the following: "The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden."<sup>159</sup> What could this mean if the word 'essence' were not a reference to something outside of language and did not direct us to something in the object we are studying?

Derrida's belief that the signifiers do not refer to an external, transcendental signified undermines all concepts of knowledge since our statements do not ultimately refer to the world (of "transcendental" others) but to the linguistic system we inhabit. Inevitably, this concept undermines the concept of progress in scientific knowledge.<sup>160</sup> How could we measure progress if all propositions are only about the language system? How could we know what is or is not true if there is a fundamental disconnect

between our statements and reality? The Bahá'í Writings, of course cannot accept the existence of such a disconnect, as made clear by the transcendental references in the frequent allusions to the discovery of truths or realities in the world around us. If language cannot tell us anything about reality, i.e. reflect reality with some degree of accuracy, why would we bother with Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about the current condition of the world, about the necessary remedies, about the nature of the soul, the structure of creation and so on? If these statements do not refer to reality but only to other words, they are pointless.

Because Derrida posits a disconnect between the signifier and the signified, between words and what they refer to, i.e. he rejects the belief that "properties, kinds, relations, propositions, sets and states of affairs are taken to be primitive [fundamental and real] and irreducible."<sup>161</sup> In other words, Derrida is a nominalist, holding that humans construct the concepts referring to "properties, kinds, relations, propositions, sets and states of affairs" and that these constructions do not necessarily reflect reality. Our ideas represented by words do not exist outside our minds. General terms, or universals, such as 'chair' or 'red' refer to nothing that the objects of reference actually possess in common but are, rather, an arbitrary selection that ignores or marginalises some attributes by privileging others. Only individuals in their full heterogeneity are real. Hence, "[d]econstruction is opposed to anything that claims to gather up, to unite, to bring together as one,"<sup>162</sup> i.e. any concept that 'violates' individuality by lumping many individuals under a single category or thought - or organization. There is, for example, no human nature or essence - something which, as we have seen, the Bahá'í Writings flatly assert just as they assert the existence of a plant and animal nature or essence.<sup>163</sup> It is precisely because essences are real that 'Abdu'l-Bahá can tell us that we cannot know them directly but only by means of their qualities. In other words, the Writings do not think there is necessarily a disconnect between our statements and reality, though, of course, there might be in some specific instances of error.

Accepting that the signifier refers to an exterior, transcendental signified, means that in Derrida's view, the Bahá'í Writings exemplify a metaphysics of presence. Such a metaphysics holds not only that our truth-claims are supported and guaranteed by an external, transcendental (or in Kantian terms, noumenal) object, situation, relationship or process but

also that language can make such truth present to us. The desire to have language make the truth present to us he calls "logocentrism" which requires that language be an unsullied or neutral way of reflecting reality and truth. In Derrida's view, no such language exists or can exist. On the basis of various discussions in different sections of the second part of this paper, it is virtually self-evident that the Bahá'í Writings exemplify a metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. Here is an example of the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism at work:

Above all, we expressed our conviction that the time has come when religious leadership must face honestly and without further evasion the implications of the truth that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.<sup>164</sup>

Implicit in this statement is the idea that there is one external transcendental religion – which we can know through the words of Bahá'u'lláh – 'behind' the enormous "diversity of cultural expressions" that characterise world religion. To know more about this one religion, we must rely on words, the Writings' to report accurately about this aspect of human affairs.

As shown above, there is no indication that the Bahá'í Writings accept Derrida's arguments that metaphysics of any kind and logocentrism are forms of violence because they recognise that human beings, in addition to being unique individuals, also share a common essence, i.e. a "rational soul." 'Abdu'l-Bahá recognises that we are all members of a species,<sup>165</sup> i.e. share certain heritable characteristics that distinguish us from other kinds of beings, i.e. an essence. The concept of an 'species,' 'kind' or "degree of existence" is also at work in the following statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

As the degrees of existence are different and various, some beings are higher in the scale than others ... some creatures are chosen for the highest degree, as man, and some others are placed in the middle degree, as the vegetable, and some are left in the lowest degree, like the mineral."<sup>166</sup>

No doubt, deconstructionists would see such a hierarchy as an example of privileging and seek to apply their methods to destabilize and subvert an allegedly oppressive ontology. From a Bahá'í perspective, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement simply recognises the way God has created the phenomenal world which has been

given to us and must be accepted as such. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of the Writings, Derrida's doctrine about the supposedly oppressive nature of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence goes too far in privileging difference, heterogeneity and the individual i.e. is excessively 'antinomian', i.e. too willing to allow each thing to be *sui generis*, a kind and law unto itself. This is not to say that the Writings downplay heterogeneity and difference:

As the proof of uniqueness exists in all things, and the Oneness and Unity of God is apparent in the reality of all things, the repetition of the same appearance is absolutely impossible.<sup>167</sup>

Differences are real, but so are commonalities or essences: our goal is not to privilege one or the other but to apply them appropriately and in a balanced manner. In social/political terms we must maintain a middle course between a potentially anarchic antinomianism and an oppressive totalitarianism that fails to recognise individual difference.

## 17. Foucault and the Bahá'í Writings

Foucault's rejection of "grand narratives" i.e. "the theme and possibility of a total history"<sup>168</sup> puts him seriously at odds with the Bahá'í Writings in which the concept of progressive revelation is foundational. We have dealt with this before and need not discuss it again in detail. Let it suffice to point out that because revelation is progressive from one dispensation to the next, there is also some continuity between dispensations, or, to use Foucault's term, between 'epistemes.' This is clear in Shoghi Effendi's statement that in each new dispensation, the Manifestation "restates the eternal verities they [the preceding dispensations] enshrine,"<sup>169</sup> i.e. "restates their fundamentals"<sup>170</sup> in order to ensure continuity of between different dispensations. Elsewhere he says, the different dispensations are "identical in their aims ...[and] continuous in their purpose,"<sup>171</sup> thereby re-emphasising the theme of continuity between dispensations of epistemes. Such emphasis is wholly in conflict with Foucault's "caesuralism," his focus on "discontinuity,"<sup>172</sup> between historical epistemes, on the "divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts"<sup>173</sup> from one to the other. In Foucault's view, we must "renounce all those themes whose function is to ensure infinite continuity of discourse."<sup>174</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings recognition of historical continuities between dispensations of epistemes undermines Foucault's

project of emphasising the 'caesuras' or breaks in order to ensure that each is treated as a completely unique and heterogeneous. Like Lyotard and Derrida, he sees grand universal themes and continuities (or grand all encompassing universal concepts) as threats to individuality and diversity.

The Bahá'í Writings reject this unbalanced, one-sided view of history and accept the presence of both continuities and discontinuities as humankind evolves. Re-iterating the fundamentals ensures continuity and the emphasis on progress ensures change, discontinuity and new developments. As Shoghi Effendi says,

in accordance with the principle of progressive revelation every Manifestation of God must needs vouchsafe to the peoples of His day *a measure of divine guidance ampler than any which a preceding and less receptive age could have received or appreciated.*<sup>175</sup>

Thus, we have a gradual building process or progress as we evolve through various conditions and various dispensations or epistemes. Our progress and knowledge is accumulative across differing epistemes thereby improving our understanding of ourselves and the world. Foucault, of course, sees no progress from one episteme to another, but only succession. His one-sided view of history, his rejection of continuity and progress brings him into conflict with the Bahá'í belief that human history shows and erratic but persistent evolution towards the unification of humankind into a global commonwealth as seen in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk about unity in the "political realm ... unity of thought in world undertakings ... unity in freedom ....unity in religion ... unity of nations ....unity of races ....[and] unity of language."<sup>176</sup> This means that the Bahá'í Writings see history as teleological or goal-oriented, shaped by a final cause, whereas Foucault, by virtue of his emphasis on discontinuity and his denial of progress does not.

The Bahá'í Writings have other difficulties with Foucault's views on history. First, it bears pointing out specifically that the progressive nature of science through various epistemes is regarded as highly problematical for Foucault's theory.<sup>177</sup> Second, while the Writings do not deny that chance and human failings play a role in history – which is what Foucault wants to stress – these factors are not able to derail material and spiritual progress that marks human evolution. Third, the Bahá'í Writings can agree that historical knowledge is perspectival, but must do so with serious qualifications. Most obvious is the fact

that the perspective of the Manifestation, His appointed successors and interpreters and the Universal House of Justice have a privileged perspective on history and this provides us with an Archimedean point from which to evaluate and judge other perspectives by their degree of harmony with Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Thus, many viewpoints are possible but whatever one we choose, must harmonize with or at least not conflict with what the Writings state. Finally, the Writings disagree with Foucault's tendency to explain cultural and historical events exclusively in terms of the lowest common denominator, i.e. in terms of what the Writings call man's "animal nature."<sup>178</sup> Recognising the importance of our animal propensities, as well as the importance of seemingly insignificant events is not, in itself at odds with the Bahá'í Writings. Indeed, the Báb's prayer that "All are His servants and all abide by His Bidding"<sup>179</sup> can be understood in this context to mean that insignificant, shameful or even hostile acts will ultimately work for the goal of history, the eventual unification of humankind. However, such explanations too easily become reductionistic insofar as they ignore or denigrate humankind's higher motives and "spiritual susceptibilities"<sup>180</sup> which also have their role in the unfolding of history. In other words, whereas the Writings do not deny that people sometimes act on the basis of their "animal nature," they disagree that human beings can be accurately presented solely in that light.

This last issue is important because it sheds light on a significant difference between the philosophical anthropology or theory of man found in the Bahá'í Writings and in Foucault. In the Bahá'í view, humankind has a dual nature, being both animal and spiritual: "man is dual in aspect: as an animal he is subject to nature, but in his spiritual or conscious being he transcends the world of material existence."<sup>181</sup> Through this spiritual nature we are able to recognise the existence of transcendental realities like God and the soul and orient our lives towards them while our animal nature remains imprisoned in the material world. Furthermore, man's true vocation, his destiny is to transcend the physical world, to seek more than material knowledge<sup>182</sup> and pursue his evolution in the spiritual plane after his material demise. However, Foucault shows no awareness of man's spiritual aspect; it plays no role in his archaeological and genealogical analyses and explanations of history or human nature other than as a man-made construct in a particular episteme. The reason for this is programmatic unwillingness to probe 'beneath' the images generated by our epistemes in order to identify their transcendental objects.



He writes, "We shall not return to the state anterior to discourse,"<sup>183</sup> meaning that he will not look beyond the discourse of signifiers generated by an episteme to some external or transcendental signified.

By refusing to return to "state anterior to discourse," i.e. to an external, transcendental object, Foucault, like Derrida, conflates epistemology and ontology; he refuses to recognize a transcendental signifier beyond the signifier. Things ontologically are as we know them, no more and no less; what we 'see' is what there is, and nothing more. The Writings, of course, disagree:

There was a time when they [the realities of things] 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.<sup>184</sup>

Admitting that things have "hidden secrets" and unknown natures means that the signified is not identical to the signifier, that what a thing is – its ontology – is not limited to what we know about it – our epistemology. In other words, there is an external, transcendental signified separate from the discourse we use about things. This also implies that the subjective knower is distinct from what is known, i.e. the object of knowledge and, thereby, reinforces the subject-object distinction. In addition, the object is not dependent on the subjective knower. For Foucault this is problematic. As James Williams says, "Foucault is critical of this ambiguous transcendence of subject and the system, where the subject is both outside the causality and totality of the system, yet capable of acting within it."<sup>185</sup> Given this transcendence, the knower is able to evaluate his or her own knowledge in regards to accuracy and adequacy to the object and refine and modify her ideas or even overthrow them completely. That is how progress occurs. For Foucault, however, this is not possible since the knower constitutes the object and, therefore, has nothing – no anterior nature or essence – to compare it against.

For the Bahá'í Writings, Foucault's position is especially unacceptable that God, the "Self-Subsistent" is in any whatsoever dependent on human perception and construction. Certainly, people and societies form images of God in their own minds, but these do not constitute God Himself or God's Essence in any way. These images or idols have absolutely no affect on God's ontological nature. In contrast, Foucault's

position involves a strange reversal: if God's nature is constituted by man, then, because of the conflation between epistemology and ontology, we could say that, in effect, man is the creator of God. This, of course, would reverse the relationship between the dependent and the independent, between the contingent and the necessary, between the immanent (us) and the transcendent (God) and the time-bound and the timeless. Finally, we note that the rejection of transcendence in all its forms, leads to a 'one-dimensional' world picture, a 'flatland' in which only the immanent is real. This is unacceptable to the Writings because man's essence is his spiritual not his immanent material nature.

It is self-evident that Foucault's position on epistemes leads to relativism. Each episteme is completely independent of all others, and, whatever beliefs and values it has, cannot be judged by others. However, as we have already seen in previous discussions, the belief in the discovery of truth, in progressive accumulation and improvement of knowledge as well as belief in a universal human nature make such relativism unacceptable to the Writings. It might, of course, be argued that the Bahá'í Writings themselves adopt an epistemological relativism, as Shoghi Effendi seems to do when he says that "religious truth is not absolute but relative."<sup>186</sup> However, to understand what Shoghi Effendi means we must look at the entire context of this quote, namely the subject of progressive revelation in which the essential "eternal verities"<sup>187</sup> remain while the man-made doctrines and errors are removed and/or changed.

He [Bahá'u'lláh] insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the *eternal verities* they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the *essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious* in their teachings, separates the God-given *truths from the priest-prompted superstitions*.<sup>188</sup>

It is the man-made additions and doctrines that are relative and change not the "eternal verities" which are continuous through successive dispensations and universally valid for all human beings. Moreover, we must not forget that according to the Writings, the Manifestation and His authorized interpreters provide the absolute standard, the Archimedeian standpoint from which all other views may be evaluated and judged. Perspectives are to be judged by their degree of harmonization with what the Manifestation reveals. As we have seen before, the Manifestation provides us with the means to distinguish truth from error, science from superstition, moral from

immoral and fact from fiction. From this it becomes clear that Foucault's relativism is incompatible with the Bahá'í Writings on the issue of relativism.

The Bahá'í Writings contradict Foucault's view of reason insofar as they believe that reason can actually provide objectively and universally true knowledge. Foucault, of course, does not trust reason to deliver true knowledge. According to Best and Kellner, "His concept of 'power/knowledge' is symptomatic of the postmodern suspicion of reason and the emancipatory schemes advanced in its name."<sup>189</sup> The following quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear the great difference between Foucault's views and the Writings': "God has created man in order that he may perceive the verity of existence and endowed him with mind or reason to discover truth."<sup>190</sup> This does, not, of course, mean that in the Bahá'í view reason as a perfect and flawless instrument for, as we have seen, it is not; however, it is good enough to be made a criterion for evaluating both religion and science as evident in the following quotation:

true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond. Religious teaching which is at variance with science and reason is human invention and imagination unworthy of acceptance.<sup>191</sup>

At the very least, reason can bring us closer to the truth of things and, since truth is one,<sup>192</sup> this truth is, at least potentially, universal, i.e. valid across all epistemes. For Foucault the idea of universal truths is untenable because each episteme has its own rules about reason and truth and, therefore, judgments across differing epistemes are not allowable.

In regards to the subject of truth and power, the difference between Foucault and the Writings is that Writings do not agree that any and all truth claims are necessarily expressions of the will-to-power and part of a "regime[] of power"<sup>193</sup> seeking to dominate its rivals merely for the sake of power. As Foucault says, knowledge "creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence."<sup>194</sup> Like Derrida, Foucault thinks that knowledge is innately violent because it subordinates individual heterogeneity to generalizations and universal concepts, and because each truth-claim is actually a power-claim advanced against all other truth/power claims. This free-for-all struggle for domination among truth-claims is inevitable because there is no standard by which to evaluate and judge them. This inability

to distinguish true from false or partially true is, of course, an unavoidable consequence of relativism which lacks a transcendental Archimedean standpoint from which to judge competing truth-claims. Truth-claims thus become mere assertions of preference and/or will. In short, epistemology is reduced to power-politics. However, the Bahá'í Writings do not envisage such a reduction because the quest for truth and knowledge is not seen as being inherently political in nature but rather as quest to know and to understand God's creation. This attitude is made clear by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight ... In fact, science may be likened to a mirror wherein the infinite forms and images of existing things are revealed and reflected. It is the very foundation of all individual and national development ... Therefore, seek with diligent endeavor the knowledge and attainment of all that lies within the power of this wonderful bestowal.<sup>195</sup>

It bears a passing note that this passage contains 'Abdu'l-Bahá's picture of science as a mirror, reflecting the world, which is to say, that knowledge is not or at least not entirely a man-made construction with no reference to anything beyond the language system. Knowledge, in the Bahá'í view is not simply immanent to the episteme; it has transcendental references, just as a mirror refers beyond itself. More immediate to our purpose is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's portrayal of knowledge as fulfilling humankind's "divine purpose" in our "individual and national development." In other words, knowledge and truth are not centered on the acquisition and/or maintenance of power but instead are centered on fulfilling our divinely mandated destiny, on personal and/or collective self-actualization. The Writings do not deny that knowledge is very useful, or that it can be mis-used for political/power purposes; however, they do not accept Foucault's contention that the quest for power is an inevitable and inherent part of seeking and conveying knowledge.

Another obvious difficulty with Foucault's philosophy is that it leaves the self, the human subject, more or less passive, a helpless object of action the various "truth games" and discourses that constitute any given episteme. What room can there be for free action or ethical behavior under such circumstances? As Danaher, Schirato and Webb point out, Foucault himself became more sensitive to this problem towards

the end of his career and tried to argue that the subject can, in fact, shape itself like a work of art or a novel.<sup>196</sup> However, this change does not seem to be consistent with the philosophy he outlined in the majority of his important works in which he successfully undercut the whole notion of the self or subject as an agent in its own life.

The Bahá'í Writings, of course, do not agree that the self, or subject, or soul is not a substance as Foucault claims. 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says quite pointedly on this issue,

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>197</sup>

Here we have the clearest possible indication that according to the Writings, the self or subject or soul is a substance that persists through its accidental changes and is precisely the kind of single, unitary, independent and consistent entity posited by Descartes and Kant. Indeed, the soul is not only a substance, but it also possesses inherent personality from the outset, and, therefore is not simply a construction based on an episteme.

The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance, veiled and deprived from beholding the signs of God.<sup>198</sup>

The personality is essentially transcendent to the episteme, although the episteme can influence its future development, strengthening some features, weakening others. Nevertheless, we must always bear in mind that despite these changes, the soul's essential, universal attributes remain the same: it is, as we have already seen, rational, it has "spiritual susceptibilities," it is immortal, it has free will in matters of morality, it is not bound by time and space, it has powers of infinite growth, it can discover the 'realities' of things, and it has powers that make it superior to phenomenal nature. Thus, the Bahá'í Writings do not deny that the self is influenced by its socio-historical surroundings, but they preserve the free agency of the self by drawing attention to its power to choose the better way.

Nor do they deny that the self can relate to itself in different ways while performing different actions, but the essential nature of the self underneath these changes remains constant. Such constancy is incompatible with Foucault's concept of the self.

## 18. Richard Rorty and the Bahá'í Writings

When we examine Rorty's postmodernism, we find that it has virtually nothing in common with the Bahá'í Writings on any major issues. In the first place, the Writings clearly accept representationalism whereas Rorty rejects it.<sup>199</sup> Representationalism, as we recall, is the belief that language does not just refer to itself but also makes verifiable statements about an external reality. In other words, language involves a signifier referring to an external signified, or, is like a mirror reflecting a transcendental signified beyond itself. Adherence to representationalism is clearly evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements that "Science may be likened to a mirror wherein the images of the mysteries of outer phenomena are reflected,"<sup>200</sup> and that "science may be likened to a mirror wherein the infinite forms and images of existing things are revealed and reflected."<sup>201</sup>

If language did not allow us to reflect reality adequately, we could not form theories or scientific propositions that inform us about reality with some degree of accuracy and, therefore, could not speak of the "progress science and knowledge have made."<sup>202</sup> We could not speak of such "progress" because our theories and/or propositions would not tell us anything about reality, and therefore, we could not know if we had made any progress by improving theories, i.e. making theories more accurate reflections of reality. We could not even discard false theories, because knowing that a theory is false implies that we already have a better way of understanding reality. In addition, if we reject representationalism we also find ourselves perpetually trapped in a prison of language and linguistic constructs that makes reality - if it even exists - inaccessible. Just as in Kant's philosophy, we are permanently enclosed in the phenomenal realm, so in Rorty's rejection of representationalism, we are perpetually confined within conversations that refer to nothing other than themselves: sentences, he says, are only "connected with other sentences rather than with the world."<sup>203</sup> He is satisfied with this situation.

An idea closely associated with representationalism is that, that reason can provide us genuine knowledge about reality. By means of reason we can develop theories and propositions that are capable of discovering truths, i.e. reflecting reality: "He [God] has endowed him [man] with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to investigate and *discover* the truth, and that which he finds *real* and *true* he must accept."<sup>204</sup> The very purpose of reason is the discovery of truth: "God has created man in order that he may *perceive the verity of existence* and endowed him with *mind or reason to discover truth*."<sup>205</sup> Reason, if properly applied, can reflect the truth about reality, or put otherwise, can correspond to reality. For his part, Rorty thinks that reason is a faculty that "can now be dispensed with - and should be dispensed with"<sup>206</sup> because it cannot tell us anything about the real world since sentences are only connected to other sentences. This is not something to which the Writings can agree. Nor can they agree to Rorty's proposal that instead of pursuing knowledge, "we just might be *saying something*"<sup>207</sup> simply in order to "keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth."<sup>208</sup> This, for Rorty is "a sufficient aim of philosophy."<sup>209</sup> In effect, for Rorty, philosophy and science are no longer interested in attaining truth.<sup>210</sup> This is completely incompatible with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "It is, therefore, clear that in order to make any progress in the search after truth we must relinquish superstition."<sup>211</sup> From Rorty's viewpoint, we might want to cling to the superstition simply because it keeps the conversation alive.

One additional consequence of representationalism is that the Writings, unlike Rorty, accept realism, the belief that reality is what it is independent of human observation. At this point a clarification is in order: the Writings espouse realism in regards to original or 'first nature', the universe as created by God, the universe which depends for its inherent essence and attributes on God, not humankind. Of course, the Writings recognise that human creations like societies, laws and customs traditionally known as 'second nature,' depend on us, at least to a certain extent. However, the arguments surrounding philosophical 'realism' are focussed on the issue of whether or not original nature depends on us in any way, as for example Kant says it does. The Bahá'í Writings clearly do not accept the Kantian notion - or postmodern variations of it - that humankind constitutes original nature and its laws. These natural laws are discovered and not constituted by us.<sup>212</sup>

Since, for Rorty, sentences can only refer to other sentences and not to reality, it follows that he is incapable of recognising the existence of essences. On his premises, how could we possibly know about them since our sentences or propositions cannot mirror reality? Therefore, they must be linguistic constructs of some kind, products of conversation. The Writings, of course, assert the reality of essences of things, and even of God<sup>213</sup> and even provide guidance in we can and cannot come to know essences:

*Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.*<sup>214</sup>

Just as Rorty denies the existence of essences, Rorty emphatically rejects the notion of a “core self,”<sup>215</sup> an essential self, a ‘true’ self that somehow endures which remains what it is independent of changes in one’s beliefs and desires.<sup>216</sup> This so-called ‘self’ is a fiction created by language.<sup>217</sup> He tells us that ““there is no self distinct from this self-reweaving web”<sup>218</sup> of muscles, movements, beliefs and states of mind, i.e. no core substantial independently existing entity. Rorty adds that we should “avoid the self-deception of thinking that we possess a deep, hidden, metaphysically significant nature which makes us ‘irreducibly’ different from inkwells or atoms,”<sup>219</sup> meaning that the self is a natural product like anything else. The Writings, of course reject this view and assert that the “rational soul is the substance and the body depends on it”<sup>220</sup> and, unlike all other things, can exist independently of the body after death. This idea of the soul’s existence as an independently existing substance is re-enforced when ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says that “the personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body.”<sup>221</sup> If the personality is “from its beginning”, it is obviously not dependent on our physical self-construction or ‘reweaving’ to use Rorty’s term, and, therefore, exists as a real entity.

In contradiction to Rorty and the postmodernists, the Bahá’í Writings advocate foundationalism, i.e. the belief that there are certain propositions, principles and/or knowledge and truths which are non-inferential i.e. not dependent on other justifications and are self-evident, i.e. cannot be denied without falling into self-contradiction or into denying self-evident empirical experience. For example, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá recognises that God is “the self-evident Reality”<sup>222</sup> and expresses shock that educated academics cannot see this. Moreover, “[i]t is a self-



evident truth that all humanity is the creation of God. All are His servants and under His protection. All are recipients of His bestowals,<sup>223</sup> and “[I]t is a self-evident fact that phenomenal existence can never grasp nor comprehend the ancient and essential Reality.”<sup>224</sup> A final example of truths that are foundational in the Writings:

*It is self-evident that the human spirit is simple, single and not composed in order that it may come to immortality, and it is a philosophical axiom that the individual or indivisible atom is indestructible.*<sup>225</sup>

The Writings probably accept foundationalism because all thinking – including anti-foundationalism – requires certain premises, assumptions and axioms to work. The notion that anyone’s thinking let alone a philosophical position can be genuinely anti-foundational is a self-contradictory willow-the-wisp. At the very least it would require the assumption that there exist foundational arguments since if no such arguments existed, anti-foundationalism would lose its reason for being. In addition to being foundational, the Writings also endorse metaphysics, i.e. “the investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality”<sup>226</sup> and are replete with examples of metaphysical analysis:

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

This Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design from which it will never depart ... But when you look at Nature itself, you see that it has no intelligence, no will.<sup>227</sup>

These are patently assertions about how nature actually is, its mode of existing and its limitations i.e. they deal with the nature and structure of reality. In Rorty’s view, such statements are impossible and, therefore, patent nonsense.

Another significant difference between Rorty and the Bahá'í Writings is Rorty’s adherence to relativism, as illustrated by his remark that ironists like himself “do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves.”<sup>228</sup> In other words, he does not look to a God – or a transcendental, Archimedean standpoint to resolve his philosophical issues and conflicts. Rejecting one or both of these makes Rorty – his strenuous denials notwithstanding – a relativist since that leaves no way of adjudicating among

conflicting viewpoints. To prove that he does not think all views are equally good, he asserts that a pragmatist like himself “thinks his views are better than the ‘realists,’ but he does not think his views correspond to the nature of things.”<sup>229</sup> Basically, he thinks his views are better because he is a “liberal” and, therefore, “more afraid of being cruel than anything else.”<sup>230</sup> It is difficult to take his claim that he is not a relativist at face value. Given his belief that statements cannot correspond to reality (and, therefore cannot be tested by reality), that rationality is simply a local cultural bias without general validity and that truth itself is a chimera, on what ground other than sheer dogmatic assertion can he claim that his philosophy is better? (Unless of course he relies on revelation which he does not.) If language games are incommensurable, if there is no rational or empirical way of ‘proving’ one view or another, then the alleged superiority of one view comes down to a dogmatic assertion of preference, i.e. of Nietzsche’s will-to-power. In the last analysis Rorty’s liberalism has nothing more than his preference to recommend it. Ironically, it is precisely such dogmatic assertion that his much recommended edifying conversation is supposed to replace. Judged by his own standards, Rorty’s views exemplify a thorough-going, i.e. radical relativism both in epistemology and ethics. The Bahá’í Writings, will certainly agree about the value of avoiding cruelty, but they cannot agree that the desire to avoid cruelty is based on nothing more than personal whim and preference; instead, they see such a desire grounded in our common human nature and the essential one-ness of humankind and the commandments of God.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that on virtually all substantive and fundamental issues, the Bahá’í Writings and Rorty’s philosophy differ. Even Rorty’s advocacy of “solidarity” and “edifying conversation” do not really bridge the gap between the two because the Bahá’í Dispensation wants to achieve solidarity through the recognition of certain foundational truths such as the existence of God or the essential one-ness of humankind. It does not think solidarity can be built on mere ‘political considerations’ in the politics of knowledge or by temporarily edifying conversations. Rorty’s goals cannot be relied upon to be the foundation for a social order because they are merely ‘political’ and not spiritual in nature and according to the Writings such unity does not last.<sup>231</sup> Thus, here too, as with other postmodern philosophers, we are forced to conclude that despite superficial or accidental similarities, the differences between Rorty and the Bahá’í Writings are essential

and substantial.

## 19. Baudrillard and the Bahá'í Writings

For the most part, the Bahá'í Writings have the same kind of difficulties with Baudrillard as they have with the other postmodernists. There may well be agreement on individual points, but the Writings cannot accept the fundamental ontological and epistemological premises of Baudrillard's work. Given such foundational disagreement, we can only conclude that whatever specific concurrences we may discover are accidental and, therefore, superficial, and not essential.

Even if we choose to read Baudrillard as a sociologist describing postmodern social phenomena and not, like the other postmodernists we have examined, as a philosopher promoting a certain philosophic programme we shall still have difficulty with his analysis from a Bahá'í perspective.

The difficulties between Baudrillard and the Bahá'í Writings begin with the conclusions he draws from the Borges short-story, "On Exactitude in Science." According to Baudrillard, this story shows the implosion of intellectual categories so that the usually accepted and clearly defined terms of our thought cease to be distinct and meld into one another. (This is not unlike Derrida's subversion in which a term - such as *pharmakon* or medicine - may turn into its opposite, poison.) If the map in the story is really as large as the territory, what does the map represent? The represented and that which represents have become one. What is the distinction between the signified and the signifier, between "a referential being or a substance"?<sup>232</sup> Other threatened binaries are cause and effect, active and passive, subject and object and ends and means,<sup>233</sup> as well as true and false, real and imaginary.<sup>234</sup> Other untenable distinctions include real and ideal, original and copy, appearance and reality, and essential and nonessential.

The Bahá'í Writings do not agree that these terms are meaningless and/or outmoded in our analysis of reality and the human situation. Because we have touched on this subject before, only a brief review of some of the evidence will be necessary. They clearly distinguish between true and false as when Bahá'u'lláh says that "the divine Purpose hath decreed that the true should be known from the false, and the sun from the shadow."<sup>235</sup> Indeed, without these distinctions, there would no basis for an ethical teachings. As we have seen previously, the Writings clearly accept the distinction between cause and

effect,<sup>236</sup> real and imaginary,<sup>237</sup> essential and accidental (nonessential),<sup>238</sup> signified and signifier as in the word 'God' and the actual God, substance and accident,<sup>239</sup> and subject and object as in the perceiver and what is perceived.<sup>240</sup> In other words, the Writings accept as useful analytical tools precisely those binary concepts that Baudrillard no longer finds serviceable in his analysis of reality and postmodern society. Quite obviously, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá find these concepts applicable and build on them a significant portions of their analysis of reality, the general condition of humankind and the condition of the contemporary world.

Furthermore, if all these essential differences simply meld, it is impossible to be rational since rationality depends on clear and distinct categories of thought that allow us to attain clear and decisive answers. According to Baudrillard, "All the referentials intermingle their discourses in a circular Moebian compulsion,<sup>241</sup> i.e. go around endlessly from one opposite to another, and, thereby prevent reason from functioning. In other words, the efficacy of reason as a way of understanding reality is short-circuited, leaving us no further ahead than we were without it. The Bahá'í Writings, as we have seen, do not share this pessimistic view of the ability of reason to discover truth about reality. According to Baudrillard, however, "truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist."<sup>242</sup>

Since "truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist," it is clear that metaphysics (which he satirizes as "pataphysics"<sup>243</sup>) is impossible. After all, metaphysics untenable since metaphysics requires clearly identified causal relationships in its study of the structure and nature of reality. Furthermore, if our propositions are no longer referential and do not refer to reality, we cannot discuss reality at all let alone decide which propositions are true. This, too, makes metaphysics impossible as does the view that we can no longer distinguish real from unreal, or appearance from reality; with this situation "goes all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearance, of the real and its concept ..." <sup>244</sup> However, the Writings do not accept this view, as is quite evident from the numerous passages of metaphysics in the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá obviously think that metaphysics is not only possible but also, that some metaphysical understanding is necessary for our well-being and spiritual evolution. Without some understanding of metaphysics, how can we understand and appreciate our spiritual nature in this world and our super-natural destiny in the next?

Let us examine another example. The Writings do not agree with Baudrillard's claim that in the postmodern world "there is no real,"<sup>245</sup> that we live in a hyperreal world in which the simulation constitutes reality. This is why, in his view, Disneyland *is* America. While the Bahá'í Writings may accept that for some this might be true insofar as it describes a rather unfortunate state of mind, it is certainly not an accurate description of how things actually are. In other words, they question the melding of reality and simulation into a hyperreality, and the denial of any difference between them is simply inadequate metaphysical analysis of reality. The materially and spiritually poor are not simulations experiencing simulated poverty and hunger, for example, their deprivations are very real and cannot be cured with a simulated sandwich. The distinction between reality and the difference between it and "vain imaginings"<sup>246</sup> is as operative in the postmodern world as much as it is at any other time in human history.

## 20. Conclusion

As we have already noted, it is difficult to escape the general conclusion that as far as the major exponents of post modernism are concerned, i.e. Nietzsche, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Rorty and Baudrillard, the disagreements with the Bahá'í Writings are foundational. There are, of course, individual similarities and agreements, but in light of the foundational differences we have observed in epistemology, ontology, ethics, philosophical anthropology (theory of man) and cultural studies, such concurrences cannot reasonably be regarded as more than accidental and fortuitous. In our view, this means that we cannot adhere to both the postmodern philosophy articulated by these thinkers and to the philosophical positions explicitly and implicitly held by the Bahá'í Writings without losing consistency and coherence of view-point, and without falling into difficult logical contradictions.

Given this situation, can Bahá'í scholars make use of postmodern techniques and views in studying or creatively interpreting the Writings? In our view, the answer is generally negative because the foundational differences are too great to be bridged. How, for example, can we overcome the diametrically opposed positions on grand narratives, privileged authors, interpreters and viewpoints, or external, transcendental objects of signification and knowledge? The postmodern insistence on immanence, its 'immanentism' (inherited from Nietzsche) is also at odds with the Bahá'í insistence on

transcendentalism, on the reality of God, the soul and the supernatural.<sup>247</sup> These positions are logically reconcilable. How could a Bahá'í scholar use Derrida in a study of the Writings when, according to Derrida, any reading of any text can be endlessly shown to subvert its own meaning and thereby forestall any final reading or interpretation. Insofar as there is no authoritative or final reading, all readings become equal. How far can deconstruction, subversion and destabilizing texts go? Can it go so far as to show that, Bahá'u'lláh's statement, "Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self"<sup>248</sup> also means its opposite, 'Let your vision become narrow and focussed on your own country and your own self'? Can we apply such endless subversion to the messages from the Universal House of Justice? Little reflection is required to see what insurmountable difficulties this would raise for teaching the Bahá'í Faith, explicating its teachings and principles, defending it against critics and engaging in meaningful inter-faith dialogue. Who, if we applied such methods, would or could really know what the Bahá'í Faith stood for? Consequently, this paper suggests that Bahá'í scholars make very cautious use even of the accidental similarities with postmodernism and ensure they do not entangle themselves in philosophical positions that create difficulties with the Writings.

There are two possible partial exceptions to this, Heidegger and Baudrillard. Heidegger's philosophy of Being has been given theological interpretations<sup>249</sup> that in many respects are in harmony with the Writings. There is certainly no problem in regards to Heidegger's refusal to confuse Being with beings, or, in Bahá'í terms, God with creations, either natural or our own man-made idols. Nor is there any inherent difficulty or insurmountable difficulty with Heidegger's theory of truth as *aletheia*, the disclosure of the Being of individual beings, or the task of art and especially poetry as the disclosure of the Being of beings.<sup>250</sup>

If we read Baudrillard's work as a sociological diagnosis of the corrupt condition of society and culture, i.e. as a sociological description of a world in which entire societies have been "deluded by a mere phantom which the vain imaginations of its peoples have conceived,"<sup>251</sup> then one might be favourably inclined towards his analyses of the postmodern condition. His assertion that boundaries have blurred between the real and artificial or imaginary, true and false, cause and effect, subject and object is not inherently opposed to the

Bahá'í Writings *if* we read it as an analysis of individual and social pathology. However, if we read Baudrillard's work as we read Lyotard's, Derrida's, Foucault's or Rorty's i.e. as a program that is being suggested for the analysis and exploration of the postmodern world, then we have the same problems we have with these other philosophers: the Bahá'í Writings accept and make use of the numerous metaphysical categories that Baudrillard rejects outright. In our view, the latter reading is more justified than the former because Baudrillard nowhere gives any sign of recognising that the postmodern view of reality he describes is a distortion and misrepresentation of reality as it really is, i.e. reality as described by the Bahá'í Writings. That is why he is included in this study.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ponder this in thine heart, that the sweet gales of divine knowledge, blowing from the meads of mercy, may waft upon thee." Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 149. References to this 'heart-knowable' abound in the Writings.

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- <sup>2</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p.208; emphasis added.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.288.
- <sup>4</sup> PUP 304; emphasis added.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- <sup>6</sup> See for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146 - 147
- <sup>7</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- <sup>8</sup> 'SAQ 297; PUP 20 - 22.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 298.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.7.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* , p.303
- <sup>12</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá* v1, p. 115.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.298 - 299.
- <sup>18</sup> *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 299.
- <sup>19</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.
- <sup>21</sup> PUP 287; emphasis added.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.312 -313
- <sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Book III, Section 12.
- <sup>24</sup> See footnotes 286 and 288. See also *Some Answered Questions*, p. 299.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá , *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* p.255; emphasis added.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich, p.759.
- <sup>27</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p.327.
- <sup>28</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, SS6, Section III.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18; emphasis added.
- <sup>30</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 195.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.179.
- <sup>33</sup> SAQ 5. Ch. 2: "Proofs and Evidences of the Existence of God"
- <sup>34</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 17.
- <sup>35</sup> GWB XCIV, p. 192; emphasis added.
- <sup>36</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 93.
- <sup>37</sup> PUP p. 327; emphasis added.
- <sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 18.
- <sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.

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- <sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 17.
- <sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Before Sunrise."
- <sup>42</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208.
- <sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552.
- <sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Of Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*.
- <sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #493.
- <sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #534.
- <sup>47</sup> PUP 287; emphasis added.
- <sup>48</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3-4.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 253; emphasis added.
- <sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 15.
- <sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552.
- <sup>52</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, Book 4, 2003.
- <sup>53</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.42; emphasis added.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 9.
- <sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*. First Essay, Section 6; see also *Beyond Good and Evil*.
- <sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part III, "The Convalescent", p.215.
- <sup>57</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 223.
- <sup>58</sup> *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 61.
- <sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part II, "The Pitiful", p. 87.
- <sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part III, "The Convalescent", p. 207; emphasis added.
- <sup>61</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- <sup>62</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 287.
- <sup>63</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 286; emphasis added.
- <sup>64</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 89.
- <sup>65</sup> *The Kita-i-Aqdas* 13.
- <sup>66</sup> *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 176.
- <sup>67</sup> Robert Audi, editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 563.
- <sup>68</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.21.; in other works, Heidegger spells it 'being' without the capital.
- <sup>69</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.23.
- <sup>70</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.23.
- <sup>71</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being"
- <sup>72</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being."
- <sup>73</sup> An Aristotelian 'substance' is not necessarily a material substance as Descartes, Hume and Locke mistakenly thought. A substance is anything that is not an attribute of something else. For example, 'strength' is not a substance because it can only exist as an attribute of a substance.

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- <sup>74</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072a.
- <sup>75</sup> Ian Kluge, *The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings*," *Lights of Irfan IV*, 2003.
- <sup>76</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being."
- <sup>77</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, p. 46 - 47.
- <sup>78</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.23.
- <sup>79</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.
- <sup>80</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, p. 178.
- <sup>81</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 47.
- <sup>82</sup> *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 23.
- <sup>83</sup> Micahel Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, p. 84.
- <sup>84</sup> Micahel Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, p. 84
- <sup>85</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 261.
- <sup>86</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.259.
- <sup>87</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- <sup>88</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p. 251; emphasis added.
- <sup>89</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."
- <sup>90</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 154.
- <sup>91</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.259; italics added.
- <sup>92</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 69.
- <sup>93</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 69.
- <sup>94</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 69.
- <sup>95</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 69.
- <sup>96</sup> *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 237.
- <sup>97</sup> *Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words* (Persian) # 33.
- <sup>98</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XVII, p. 46.
- <sup>99</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá* v1, p. 168; emphasis added.
- <sup>100</sup> Heidegger, "Existence and Being."
- <sup>101</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p.299.
- <sup>102</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."
- <sup>103</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth."
- <sup>104</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 8.
- <sup>105</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XVI, p. 40
- <sup>106</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCII, p. 183.
- <sup>107</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 397.
- <sup>108</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- <sup>109</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- <sup>110</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 47.
- <sup>111</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 136.

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- <sup>112</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.128.
- <sup>113</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 246.
- <sup>114</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.36.
- <sup>115</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208.
- <sup>116</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, "Non-Overlapping Magesteria," [www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould\\_noma.html](http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html)
- <sup>117</sup> Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Letter 7.
- <sup>118</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 128.
- <sup>119</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 131.
- <sup>120</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 131.
- <sup>121</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- <sup>122</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p. 171.
- <sup>123</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.66.
- <sup>124</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.66.
- <sup>125</sup> Best and Kellner, "The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Devices."
- <sup>126</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, p.60.
- <sup>127</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.66.
- <sup>128</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.42.
- <sup>129</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.175.
- <sup>130</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.41.
- <sup>131</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.171;
- <sup>132</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* p.105.
- <sup>133</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 467.
- <sup>134</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 467.
- <sup>135</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CVI, p. 213.
- <sup>136</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p.56.
- <sup>137</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p.56.
- <sup>138</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, 33-34.
- <sup>139</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
- <sup>140</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 58
- <sup>141</sup> *Lights of Guidance*, p. 365; *Lights of Guidance*, # 725; p. 273.
- <sup>142</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- <sup>143</sup> Furthermore, if truth is not distinguished from and privileged over untruth on what grounds can Derrida even presume to critique logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence since one would be as good as the other? Clearly, he is undermining his own philosophical project.
- <sup>144</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, p.1; this is Derrida's meaning of *aporia*; the term also means a philosophical puzzle or state of puzzlement.
- <sup>145</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 303.

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- <sup>146</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 303.
- <sup>147</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208.
- <sup>148</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.
- <sup>149</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 299.
- <sup>150</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.89.
- <sup>151</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.201.
- <sup>152</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, p.79.
- <sup>153</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p.86; italics added.
- <sup>154</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p.32.
- <sup>155</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 96.
- <sup>156</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p.129.
- <sup>157</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 100.
- <sup>158</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 100.
- <sup>159</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.220.
- <sup>160</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.271; emphasis added.
- <sup>161</sup> *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 634.
- <sup>162</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, p. 78.
- <sup>163</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- <sup>164</sup> *One Common Faith*. reference.bahai.org/en/t/bic/OCF/
- <sup>165</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.184.
- <sup>166</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.130.
- <sup>167</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.283.
- <sup>168</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.10.
- <sup>169</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.
- <sup>170</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 58;
- <sup>171</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 58.
- <sup>172</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.23.
- <sup>173</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- <sup>174</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28.
- <sup>175</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 102; emphasis added.
- <sup>176</sup> *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.32.
- <sup>177</sup> J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p. 60-61.
- <sup>178</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.41.
- <sup>179</sup> "Is there any remover of difficulties save God?,". *Compilations, Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 27
- <sup>180</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.106.
- <sup>181</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.81.
- <sup>182</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.82.

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- <sup>183</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.53.
- <sup>184</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.217-218; emphasis added.
- <sup>185</sup> James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism*, p.151.
- <sup>186</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.58.
- <sup>187</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p.108.
- <sup>188</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p.108; emphasis added.
- <sup>189</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p. 50.
- <sup>190</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.287.
- <sup>191</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.107.
- <sup>192</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.62.
- <sup>193</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p. 50.
- <sup>194</sup> Michel Foucault, "Homage to Jean Hippolyte" in Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, p.120.
- <sup>195</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.50.
- <sup>196</sup> Danaher, Schirato, Webb, *Understanding Foucault*, p.150.
- <sup>197</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.239.
- <sup>198</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.239.
- <sup>199</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.
- <sup>200</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 29.
- <sup>201</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 50.
- <sup>202</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.64.
- <sup>203</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.372.
- <sup>204</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.291; emphasis added.
- <sup>205</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.287; emphasis added.
- <sup>206</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.194.
- <sup>207</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.371.
- <sup>208</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.377.
- <sup>209</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.378.
- <sup>210</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.370.
- <sup>211</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.136.
- <sup>212</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.258.
- <sup>213</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, p. 46.
- <sup>214</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.220.
- <sup>215</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.189.
- <sup>216</sup> Richard Rorty, "Non-reductive Physicalism" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.123.
- <sup>217</sup> Richard Rorty, "Non-reductive Physicalism" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.123.

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- <sup>218</sup> Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualization" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.93
- <sup>219</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.373.
- <sup>220</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- <sup>221</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240.
- <sup>222</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.17.
- <sup>223</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.40.
- <sup>224</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.113.
- <sup>225</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.306.
- <sup>226</sup> Robert Audi, editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p.563.
- <sup>227</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3.
- <sup>228</sup> Richard Rorty, "Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger," in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.97.
- <sup>229</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity:" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.23.
- <sup>230</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.192.
- <sup>231</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.191, 320.
- <sup>232</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.2.
- <sup>233</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.55.
- <sup>234</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.5.
- <sup>235</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 53.
- <sup>236</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 307.
- <sup>237</sup> PUP 191; *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, v2, p. 327.
- <sup>238</sup> TAB v3, p.562; *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 23.
- <sup>239</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- <sup>240</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 143.
- <sup>241</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.35.
- <sup>242</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.6.
- <sup>243</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Pataphysics," trans. by Drew Burk. [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=569](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=569)
- <sup>244</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, p.3.
- <sup>245</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Holograms," trans. by Sheila Glaser. [www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulation-11-holograms.html](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulation-11-holograms.html)
- <sup>246</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 80.
- <sup>247</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 11.
- <sup>248</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XLIII, p. 94.
- <sup>249</sup> For example, the work of Paul Tillich or John MacQuarrie's *An Existentialist Theology*.
- <sup>250</sup> Some of these overlaps are explored in "The Call into Being: Introduction to a Bahá'í Existentialism," in *Lights of Irfan* IV, 2003.



<sup>251</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, III, p. 6.

# Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings

Ian Kluge

## 1. Introduction

Relativism is a philosophical outlook that denies the existence of absolutely valid or universal truth claims of any kind, of ethical or legal standards, of religious revelation, of any universal point of view, of universal customs and of rationality or reasoning. In other words, the validity of all claims to any absolute or universal 'knowledge' can be reduced and limited to statements *possibly* valid in a particular context, to a particular situation and to a particular point of view. In sum, we cannot say that X is true but only that X *may be* true for someone in a particular context; "truth is relative to the standpoint of the judging subject."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some forms of relativism reject the notions of 'truth' and 'objectivity' altogether.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there is no universal or Archimedean standpoint from which to judge the validity of various contesting truth claims – which means, in effect, that no truth claim can actually be proven wrong. There are no errors. All opinions and judgments are equally valid. Because truth claims are so hedged with conditions, there can be no certainty about anything. While this may be existentially salutary in keeping us modest, in epistemology and ethics its is, as we shall see, disastrous.

In its most succinct terms, relativism is an attack on the very idea of knowledge/truth and an insistence that all claims to knowledge/truth are no more than personally or culturally held opinions or according to Nietzsche, Lyotard and Foucault, expressions of the will to power, or of endless Nietzschean and Derridean interpretations or Rortian "solidarity" ... of anything except actual knowledge. Even the 'evidence' brought to support these opinions is itself no more than merely another opinion or interpretation or another exertion of power and so on in an infinite regress. Since there can be no neutral and transcendent Archimedean standpoint from which to arbitrate among various claims to knowledge/truth, all truth claims may

be rejected as in nihilism, held in abeyance as in scepticism (epistemological agnosticism) or accepted as equally valid as in relativism.

Any ideology or system of thought that claims to have knowledge/truth is, by virtue of this claim, is not relativistic since any arbitration among candidates for truth implicitly or explicitly requires the discovery of a neutral, privileged and transcendent Archimedean standpoint from which to render judgment. On this ground alone, it is questionable that the Bahá'í Writings may be accurately described as espousing relativism: they do, after all, categorically assert the existence of God and hold His existence as provable,<sup>3</sup> that Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God for this age, that the universe is an emanation from God, that there are four causes and that all things have essence and attributes.<sup>4</sup> Such assertions are simply logically incompatible with either epistemological or ontological relativism.

It is the contention of this paper that the Bahá'í Writings manifest not relativism but relationalism,<sup>5</sup> an outlook that is often confused with relativism. In a nutshell, relationalism holds that all things exist in relationship to other things but it does reject the idea that the existence or reality of things is dependent on the perceiver, that there is no neutral, privileged Archimedean point from which to make judgments among competing knowledge claims, that all knowledge claims are equally valid, that error is impossible, that partial knowledge is incorrect knowledge and that no knowledge/truth whatever can be universal (true from all possible standpoints), objective (independent of the perceiver) and foundational (not susceptible to further analysis). This relationalism leads to a position which may broadly be described as 'evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.' It is 'evolutionary' because our knowledge increases or progresses over time; 'Platonic' because there are "eternal verities"<sup>6</sup> true for all times and places and 'perspectivist' because there may be many perspectives on the truth although not all perspectives are necessarily valid. The doctrine of progressive revelation is an example of such 'evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.' For example, through successive revelations we have adopted various perspectives as we learn more and more about the relationship between the various Manifestations, but one of these possible perspectives, denying the "station of unity,"<sup>7</sup> is simply not valid.

This change from 'relativism' to 'relationalism' is more than a mere change in terminology. In the first place, 'relativism' is

simply not an accurate description of the philosophy embedded in the Writings. If we do not use terminology correctly and accurately, we will inevitably raise misunderstandings about their philosophical nature and lead own thinking astray. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to teach, explicate and defend the Faith. Third, as we have seen, and shall see again below, relativism has a lot of philosophical baggage, i.e. brings with it a considerable number of philosophical problems that weaken any explication of the Writings, and leave it open to all kinds of attacks and misrepresentations. This, too, makes teaching, explicating and defending needlessly difficult and inefficient.

Relativism is an important issue because of the tremendous consequences for ethics, epistemology, ontology and metaphysics, law, religion, cultural studies and politics. For example, in international relations and law, cultural relativism prevents us from legislating in favour of universal human rights since our advocacy of such rights is merely a reflection of our particular political legal and cultural situation. Because human rights are merely cultural and not universal, we have no obligation let alone right to insist that other countries and other cultures abide by our views. Relativism renders all complaints about human-rights violations futile or worse, a form of imperialist bullying to impose one's own standards on others. Quite obviously, the practice of international politics is dramatically affected by the adoption of a relativist outlook. All too easily hard-heartedness and/or political cynicism can be the result. Relativism also undermines such Bahá'í teachings as the unqualified obligation to provide equal education to girls and boys, to provide equal rights for women and to end the extremes of wealth and poverty. Who, after all, has the right to insist that these teachings set the standards by which the world must abide?

Relativism also has enormous implications in regards to the subject of truth. For example, if all scientific truth claims are limited to a particular point of view, culture and situation, then there can be no universal scientific truth claims of any kind, and, conversely, there can be no erroneous ones. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* prepared the way for the acceptance of such radical relativist conclusions. According to Kuhn, all scientific theories and facts are relative to the paradigm – the assumptions, techniques and theories – which is being employed. While there are changes in the history of science, these changes do not involve an increase or clarification of improvement of knowledge because different

paradigms are "incommensurable." They employ different concepts, change the meanings of terms as well as the standards for what are real 'facts' and real 'explanations. Scientific theories change not because they are more 'true' but because of power relations, social-cultural customs and other interests at play in society. Kuhn's protests that he was not a relativist notwithstanding, there can be little question that his book supported a radical epistemological or cognitive relativism. Indeed, the full fruit of his relativist views became evident in Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* which says that science has no claim to superiority over astrology or voodoo, that science is nothing less than a system of mythology like any other and should be taught as such in schools and that other approaches to knowledge such as magic should also be taught.

"All methodologies have their limitations and the only 'rule' that survives is 'anything goes.'"<sup>8</sup>

Kuhn's and Feyerabend's relativism has received additional philosophical support from some of the most influential postmodern philosophers such as Frederick Nietzsche, Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty to name only the most prominent. By various paths they all come to agree that there are no facts, only individual or collective viewpoints, or "solidarities," that no single all-inclusive perspective exists, that all these viewpoints are equal and none "privileged" above any other, and that there is no universal or Archimedean standpoint from which to judge among competing viewpoints.<sup>9</sup> The influence of postmodern philosophy reaches throughout virtually all branches and levels of academia. Some subjects, such as literary studies, have been radically transformed by the encounter to the point where 'theory' to swamp the subject of literature itself. Philosophy has felt its very legitimacy and usefulness as a subject challenged<sup>10</sup> not to mention basic concepts such as knowledge, rationality and truth as well as the whole notion of metaphysics.<sup>11</sup> History has been touched by, among other things, the struggle over the whole notion of grand narratives versus small or local narratives,<sup>12</sup> the knowability of the past, as well as the uses of history.<sup>13</sup> Women's Studies, though not in themselves part of postmodernism, have been affected by the entire deconstructionist project, by postmodernism's analysis of power relations and, more controversially, by its antipathy to essentialism. Psychology feels the influence of postmodern thinking in its handling of gender and political science in discussions of marginalization and the workings of power.<sup>14</sup> Cultural Studies have opened new vistas for exploration

through the study of simulations and simulacra.<sup>15</sup> Postmodernism has also re-shaped and revised Freudian psycho-analysis.<sup>16</sup>

Because of its apparent intellectual egalitarianism and tolerance of all views as acceptable and equally valid, as well as its apparent ability to solve alleged contradictions in the Bahá'í Writings, relativism has attracted the favourable attention of a number of Bahá'í writers. These often take their cue from Shoghi Effendi's statement that

Its [the Bahá'í Faith's] teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that *religious truth is not absolute but relative*, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.<sup>17</sup>

Shoghi Effendi also writes that

the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, [is] the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final.<sup>18</sup>

These statements in conjunction with the teachings of the essential oneness of all religions have led some Bahá'ís to adopt relativism as a means of resolving philosophical, ethical and religious differences between the Bahá'í Faith and other religions. For some authors, such as Moojan Momen and Seena Fazel, relativism has become the intellectual foundation stone for establishing the unity among the diversity of religions.

This paper contends that these solutions do not accurately represent the Bahá'í Writings. There philosophically less problematic ways to understand the Bahá'í Writings and to explicate their teachings on religious unity and diversity than by adopting relativism. It holds that the most accurate and least problematic terms to describe the Writings are "relationalism" and "evolutionary Platonic perspectivism."

## 2. A Theoretical Framework for Relativism

All forms of relativism implicitly or explicitly reject three positions – universalism, objectivism and foundationalism and

that all forms of absolutism accept these three in one way or another. Universalism in its ontological and "discursive"<sup>19</sup> variants asserts that certain ideas, truths, situations, natures and states-of-being are found everywhere and at all times. Ontological universalism asserts that there are "entities (classes of existents) which exist for all persons."<sup>20</sup> "Discursive"<sup>21</sup> universalism maintains there are statements and beliefs which are valid in all contexts, at all times and all places and for all peoples

Relativism also rejects objectivism which asserts that certain beliefs and truths as well as certain things, situations, states-of-being are what they are independently of an observer or a world-view. Ontological objectivism means that "there are entities (classes of existents) which exist independently of the point of view, corpus of beliefs or conceptual scheme held to or employed by any particular person or society."<sup>22</sup> "Discursive" objectivism says there are beliefs that are true regardless of viewpoint, beliefs, or explanatory frameworks, which obviously conflicts with the idea that man, not the object of perception, is the measure of things, of truth and falsity.

Relativism also denies foundationalism according to which there are certain truths as well as existing things and states-of-affairs that are fundamental, i.e. not susceptible to further breakdown and analysis. Ontological foundationalism asserts that there is "a common ontology or set of basic existents, incapable of further analysis out of which all other existents are constructed."<sup>23</sup> The "discursive" version of foundationalism asserts there are basic statements or propositions incapable of further analysis which serve not only as a foundation for other statements but also as an Archimedean point from which to make objective judgments.

In studying relativism, we must also be aware of its various subtypes. Some of these subtypes overlap. Perhaps the most obvious of these is ethical relativism which denies that there are any universal, objective or foundational ethical norms applying to individuals or cultural collectives. In the last analysis, ethics are a matter of preference, or, a matter of local necessities. There can be no definitive i.e. universal, ethical judgments, or as Shakespeare says in *Hamlet*, "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."<sup>24</sup> The counterposition to ethical relativism is ethical realism which contends that at least some ethical standards are universal, objective and fundamental.

Cognitive or epistemological relativism maintains that what is considered 'true' either by individuals and by

cultures/societies will vary and that 'knowledge', i.e. so-called 'facts', are culture and/or theory laden and reflect only particular societies and individuals. There are no objective 'truths' since all truths are expressed from a specific individual and/or cultural point of view. In other words, the truth-value of a statement is relative to its context, and therefore, no statement or standpoint is privileged over any others. No possible Archimedean point, or universal viewpoint can be found to frame all forms of enquiry or to make objective judgments among different truth claims, world-views or paradigms. In a word, objectivity, including scientific objectivity, is impossible – a view we have already encountered in the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend. Cognitive relativism asserts that reason, rationality and logic are culturally determined and not objective, foundational or universally applicable. Reason is not an avenue to true knowledge.

At this point it is important to distinguish among three distinct but closely related concepts: scepticism, relativism and subjectivism. The boundaries among these three positions are fluid and one easily slides into the other. Scepticism refers to a complex of views that deny "that knowledge or even rational belief is possible, either about some specific subject matter (e.g. ethics) or in any area whatsoever."<sup>25</sup> Sceptics often maintain that "none of our beliefs is certain, that none of our beliefs is reasonable, that none of our beliefs is more reasonable than its opposite."<sup>26</sup> Scepticism can be limited to certain areas, but [g]lobal scepticism casts doubt on all our attempts to seek truth.<sup>27</sup> Sceptics deny that any knowledge can be universal, objective and foundational.

In its simplest form, relativism says that all truth claims are only 'true' from one individual or cultural standpoint and that there is no Archimedean point from which to choose the true one or even merely the 'truest' from among competing views. Relativism does not necessarily deny that we can know truth but insists that all truth-claims are standpoint-dependent. Another way of saying this is that we all have facets or aspects of the truth from our own viewpoints but that none of these facets are objective, universal or foundational.

For its part, subjectivism maintains that there is no reality existing independently from the consciousness of a subjective observer who constitutes reality as s/he experiences it. Already evident in the Greek relativist philosopher, Protagoras, subjectivism is an extreme application to the individual of the relativist principle that all truth-claims or ethical claims depend



on standpoint or context. What we pass off as apparently objective statements are really the expression of our (often emotive) preferences.<sup>28</sup>

At this point it is clear that relativism and scepticism are closely intertwined and that their differences notwithstanding, relativism can easily slip into scepticism – from ‘everything is true from its viewpoint’ to ‘we don’t know if anything is true’ and even ‘there can be no truth.’ The problem with relativism’s tolerance of all truth-claims as equally valid is that some truth-claims are so virulently incompatible – a rigorous materialism and theism for example – that a difference in viewpoint seems inadequate to resolve the conflict. It is difficult to imagine that there is a little patch of reality in which God plays no part from any standpoint whatever, and another part of the universe where God is omnipresent. Sooner or later, the friction between these viewpoints will force us to analyse them in regards to rational/logical and experiential adequacy in order to resolve the conflict. The same holds true with the various conflicting subjectivist claims: ‘true for me’ and ‘true for you’ seems an inadequate response to views about female circumcision for small girls or the willingness to accept poverty on a large scale. However, it is not difficult to see how relativism easily merges into a subjectivist attitude.

Anthropological relativism affirms that what is called ‘human nature’ is infinitely malleable and that there is no specifically definable human nature to study. In Sartre’s words, existence and freedom precede essence<sup>29</sup> – indeed, there is no human nature of essence that is given to us. Because there is no pre-given, pre-constituted human nature, we cannot argue that certain practices are ‘unnatural’ or counter to ‘natural law’, or that there are certain standards that all individuals and/or cultures ought to adopt.

Closely associated with anthropological relativism is cultural relativism according to which every culture and by implication every language organise the flux of impressions into their own version of reality as well as work out the associated values, their own protocols for discovering and assessing knowledge or truth and their own criteria by which to determine human nature. As a result of this organising or constructing of reality, all facts are value-laden, shaped and limited by certain biases inherent in every construction. These biases prevent us from obtaining an objective viewpoint independent of all observers, from obtaining a universal viewpoint true of all human beings and a foundational view necessarily true for all.

One form of cultural relativism might be called linguistic relativism. This kind of relativism, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, argues that different languages with different grammars and vocabularies require people to constitute/create the world variously because languages focus attention on different things, present time and space differently and conditions the thought patterns of its speakers. Consequently there is no way to use language to represent the world perfectly or for all. Again we see the denial of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism that characterizes relativist views. How can there be universalism if no language can express the world for all? How can there be objectivity if all – even contradictory world-views are equally valid? If all world versions are different, how can there be foundational truths?

Legal relativism is, of course, a subtype of ethical relativism. It asserts that laws do not reflect an objective, universal and foundational human nature or human situation and are entirely local to a particular time, place and culture. For this reason, laws and legal standards such as human rights and the definition of persons cannot be applied across cultures. There is no sense to the claim that one legal system is better or worse, or more or less progressive than any other.

Ontological relativism contends whatever things are deemed to exist or constitute reality is determined by individual and/or cultural beliefs and that all statements about the existence of things is context-dependent. The existence of any 'reality' is entirely dependent on the vision or version of reality we have constructed because there is no viewer-and-standpoint independent world. It is possible to take this quite literally by arguing in a manner reminiscent of Kant (on whom more below) that we humans take the raw materials presented by the universe and by means of our own concepts and choices of the boundaries of each thing construct the universe we live in.<sup>30</sup> Physics, painting or the writing of history or sociology are all ways of 'world-making.' Thus, there is no such thing as 'one world' and there is no Archimedean standpoint from which to decide which world is superior in any way. We can only adopt the pragmatic position that a particular world lends itself to our purposes more readily than other worlds.

The rejection of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism observed in the various types of relativism entails at least ten major consequences:

1. There is an infinite number of 'realities' which can be constructed by human beings, either individually or

collectively. These many or may not be reconcilable. There is no common reality or world for all people.

2. There is an infinite number of equally valid theories, descriptions and explanations of any one or all of these 'realities.' These may or may not be reconcilable.
3. There cannot be a single universally valid description, theory or even scientific explanation of all these 'realities.' In other words, there is no final description.
4. There can be no universally valid ethical prescriptions since ethical prescriptions are matters of individual and/or collective choice because there is no common ethical world for all people.
5. Consequently, there can be no universal language capable of expressing the truths of all 'realities.' The existence of such a 'universal language' is strictly prohibited and would be an undesirable attack on diversity.
6. There are no final, foundation propositions or truths that cannot be subject to other, contradictory but equally valid points of view.
7. Relativism makes it impossible to adopt the correspondence theory of truth because no one can know which version of reality is decisive, i.e. no version of reality can lead us to a final decision.
8. As Plato already pointed out in the *Theaetetus*, relativism makes it impossible for people to be wrong, misled, deceived, psychotic or simply perverse in their thinking. Everyone is right about everything.
9. Viewpoints change, but there is no Archimedean viewpoint from which to assert that a particular change represents progress or that one viewpoint is truer than any other. Thus, relativism makes the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation impossible along with the Bahá'í Faith's belief in scientific, social, economic and political progress.
10. Relativism makes the concept of a divine Manifestation impossible because a Manifestation has a privileged, Archimedean standpoint which make His pronouncements normative for all of humankind and all cultures at this time.

### 3. Virtues of Relativism

What, we may ask ourselves, does relativism have to recommend it, especially in the modern world? The answer that comes most readily to mind is that relativism helps make us aware of and sensitive to differing contexts and standpoint and, thereby, encourages not only a willingness to be open-minded but also the intellectual discipline of studying issues from new and unexpected viewpoints. This in turn, forces us to examine our own beliefs critically and to test their adequacy in regards to other candidates. These advantages, though apparently easy to state succinctly, can have an enormous impact on our intellectual culture and the way we approach knowledge-claims both our own and others'. Relativism also allows us to make sense of the bewildering variety of human customs, beliefs and practices without feeling the need to impose one particular belief or culture on others. We can embrace the various facets of truth (if there is such a thing) of each viewpoint. In other words, relativism can prevent a hasty rush to judgment about different or even outlandish beliefs.

Becoming more aware of the diversity of contexts we learn of the tremendous diversity of human cultures, thoughts, legal and social systems, bodies of knowledge and art forms. Because it rejects the claim that there exists any Archimedean standpoint from which to evaluate human constructs and activities, relativism is non-judgmental, open-minded and understanding. In a world plagued by all kinds of prejudices and animosities, relativism seems to foster attitudes and *modii operandi* that answer the world's needs for mutual appreciation and respect.

### 4. Background to Relativism

To understand why relativism is not compatible with the Bahá'í Writings, we must engage in at least a cursory exploration of the subject. The first explicit relativist is Protagoras, a philosopher in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Athens, who declares "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not."<sup>31</sup> He also said that "things are to you as they appear to you and to me such as they appear to me."<sup>32</sup> In these statements that Protagoras already strikes most, if not all, the major relativist themes in regards to epistemology, ethics and ontology. Epistemologically, he means that man, not the object of knowledge, determines what is true or false about what is perceived. The nature of an object as well as all of its attributes are governed by man, i.e. all attributes are relative to the

perceiver. Ethically, Protagoras' statement means that whatever is good or bad is decided by man and that "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."<sup>33</sup> Ontologically, it is man who determines whether something or some situation or state of affairs is or is not. Protagoras also introduces the theme of subjectivism which accompanies relativism by saying that things are as they appear to us as individuals, which is to say, you and I have different truths simply because we are different individuals with different points of view. In the last analysis "knowledge is only [personal] perception"<sup>34</sup>

Protagoras' pronouncements are paradigmatic for relativism. Though he did not exhaust the subject, he certainly outlined most of its essential themes. First, there is the rejection of universalism both in its ontological and "discursive"<sup>35</sup> variants. Ontological universalism asserts that there are "entities (classes of existents) which exist for all persons."<sup>36</sup> "Discursive" universalism maintains there are statements and beliefs which are valid in all contexts, at all times and all places and for all peoples. Second, Protagoras also rejects objectivism. Ontological objectivism means that "there are entities (classes of existents) which exist independently of the point of view, corpus of beliefs or conceptual scheme held to or employed by any particular person or society."<sup>37</sup> When Protagoras says things are, i.e. exist because we think they are, he denies ontological objectivism, and, in effect, prefigures some ideas from postmodernist constructionism. "Discursive" objectivism says there are beliefs that are true regardless of viewpoint, beliefs, or explanatory frameworks, which obviously conflicts with the idea that man, not the object of perception, is the measure of things, of truth and falsity. Finally, Protagoras beliefs reject foundationalism which follows as an implicit consequence of his earlier statements. Ontological foundationalism asserts that there is "a common ontology or set of basic existents, incapable of further analysis out of which all other existents are constructed."<sup>38</sup> This violates Protagoras' dictum that man decides "things which are, *that* they are, and of things which are not, *that* they are not."<sup>39</sup> The "discursive" version of foundationalism asserts there are basic statements or propositions incapable of further analysis which serve not only as a foundation for other statements but also as an Archimedean point from which to make objective judgments.

In Protagoras' thought we can discern explicitly and implicitly, the three trade-mark attributes of relativism: the denial of universalism (no truth applies everywhere), of foundationalism (there are only viewpoints, no final truths) and

of objectivism (reality is only what it is to me or to you).

#### 4.1 David Hume (1711 - 1776)

After Protagoras, the next major development in the history of relativism was Hume, a British philosopher whose work does not espouse relativism but nevertheless provides it with two of main ideas. According to Hume, facts and values are completely unconnected with another; we cannot (in his view) logically reason our way from a fact to a conclusion about value. Just because something is the case does not mean that it ought to be the case. Moral judgments, therefore do not deal with empirically verifiable facts but rather are matters of sentiment and emotion which are not subject to rational tests: we feel what we feel. As Hume writes,

“Moral distinctions [are] not deriv'd from reason.”<sup>40</sup>

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality. therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.<sup>41</sup>

By separating ethics and morality from reason, by showing how we cannot derive values from facts, and by asserting that values are fundamentally no more than emotional preferences, Hume opened the door to an all pervasive relativism about values. After all, how can we prove that anyone's emotions are better than anyone else's? (Hume, of course believed that all human beings had a similar emotional nature and would be repelled by or attracted to similar things but that is a different issue.) The message of Hume's texts was clear: we cannot reason about morals; our ethical choices are simply the expression of emotions and sentiments and the idea of rationally 'proving' our moral choices right was simply absurd.

Hume also contributed to the development of relativism in his denial of causality, i.e. the belief that one object or event in any way creates a subsequent event:

In reality, there is no part of matter, that does ever, by its sensible qualities, discover any power or energy, or give us ground to imagine, that it could produce any thing, or be followed by any other object, which we could denominate its effect. Solidity, extension, motion; these qualities are all complete in themselves, and never point out any other

event which may result from them.<sup>42</sup>

In short, there is no causality but only succession. It takes little reflection to realise that denying causality undermines the entire project of explaining the world scientifically by reference to causal forces. Scientists can still work with the concepts of causality, but they must admit that their causal explanations are ad hoc, assumed, adopted as a matter of faith without any empirical or rational support. Thus, other, equally valid viewpoints are possible and a 'scientific' explanation is only one among many, equally valid competitors which are correct in relation to their own explanatory principles and frameworks. In other words, we see here a denial of foundationalism (causality is not a sure foundation), universalism (causality works everywhere) and objectivism (causality works regardless of how we think).

#### 4.2 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Immanuel Kant made two major contributions to the development of modern relativism. The first, which Harre and Krausz call the "constructivist insight"<sup>43</sup> is the theory of categories according to which our perceptions of the world do not arrive in the form in which we actually experience them. Rather they arrive as 'raw data' which the mind processes and shapes by means of the categories which are the conditions on which having an experience depends. "These categories therefore are also fundamental concepts by which we think objects in general for the phenomena, and have therefore *a priori* objective validity"<sup>44</sup> They organize raw data according to time, space, causality, necessity, contingency, subsistence and accident among other things, that is, constitute, or create our experience of the phenomenal world. Thus, our mind shapes or constructs the raw data of our perceptions into a coherent world which becomes the object of our experience. In short, we construct our world, both as individuals and as collectives. It is also follows clearly from Kant's views, that the perceiving subject cannot be taken as a mirror reflecting a pre-existing reality, which is to say, the subject cannot access reality and deliver accurate reports about it. Indeed, the subject is "an obstacle to cognition"<sup>45</sup> and cannot be trusted. Because we cannot gain an Archimedean point from which to make universally valid judgments of our various world-constructs, we cannot distinguish true constructs from false. All are valid relative to the principles by which they were constructed. This also means that since reality is a human construct, there can be no objective knowledge or representation of reality and that all

we have are various constructions or stories none of which is privileged over others in terms of its truth value. This ontological relativism in which all world constructs are equal readily lends itself to a profound epistemological relativism that challenges the scientific project of discovering the truth about reality. It is impossible to discover the truth because there is no one truth about anything. What we have here is the denial of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism that characterises relativist thought.

Kant's second contribution to the development of modern relativist thought are his antinomies, i.e. demonstrations of the limitations of reason. He showed how with some questions show equally possible but rationally contradictory results i.e. demonstrate "discord and confusion produced by the conflict of the laws (antinomy) of pure reason."<sup>46</sup> In other words, on some subjects – the limitation of the universe in space and time; the concept of a whole cosmos made of indivisible atoms; the problem of freedom and causality; the existence of a necessarily existing being – reason can come to opposite but equally rational conclusions. There is simply no way to break the deadlock. Thus, "reason makes us both believers and doubters at once"<sup>47</sup> leaving us with grounds to believe and disbelieve in God and reason itself. This scepticism about reason makes it easy to reject reason as the arbitrator among various world-constructs. We can either become sceptics and doubt them all or relativists and accept them all as being true in their own way.

#### 4.3 Frederich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)

Frederich Nietzsche is the pivotal figure in the history of modern relativism given his role as the chief source and inspiration of postmodernism. Nietzsche's special contribution to modern relativism is his attack on the concepts of truth as understood by most Europeans, as well as his attack on the Greek conviction that reason and rationality could provide an Archimedean standpoint from which to judge all statements, beliefs and truth-claims. With 'reason' and 'truth' swept aside, the way was open to open-mindedly examine standpoints and explanations that were outlandishly different from their European counterparts. Thus, his virulent scepticism about science and logic made it possible for western thinkers to – at least temporarily – abandon their usual standpoints and to entertain others.

Nietzsche's attack on reason and knowledge is plainly evident when he writes, "Truth is the kind of error without which a



certain species of life could not live. The value of life is ultimately decisive.”<sup>48</sup> Here we observe that Nietzsche himself has a standpoint – life and the enhancement of life – from which he critiques knowledge and reason so vigorously that he slides over into radical scepticism. For example, what is essential about truth is not that it is true but that it serves life: “[t]he criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power.”<sup>49</sup> (Later, with Rorty, ‘truth’ would be that which serves “solidarity.”) Truth is not what is actually the case but what meets our needs in the struggles of life – a view of truth that also exemplifies subjectivism and which allows there to be as many truths as there are individuals with needs. Elsewhere he says that truth is “Inertia; that hypothesis which gives rise to contentment; smallest expenditure of spiritual force.”<sup>50</sup> In a similar vein, he writes, “The biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge,”<sup>51</sup> thereby expressing his doubts about the existence of knowledge, something he had already done in *The Birth of Tragedy* by calling science a myth.

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.<sup>52</sup>

Nietzsche’s radical attack also includes the idea that truth is made, not iscovered, that the “will to truth”<sup>53</sup> and the “will to power”<sup>54</sup> are one and the same.

Will to truth is a *making* firm, a *making* true and durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. “Truth” is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth as a processus in infinitum, and active determining – not a becoming conscious of something that is itself firm and determined. It is a word for the “will to power”.<sup>55</sup>

It is fairly obvious that when truth is reduced to power, then, in effect, we no longer have a belief in truth at all, especially since every individual and/or culture makes his own truth. According

to Nietzsche, "There exists neither "spirit," nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use."<sup>56</sup>

Whether his position is best characterised as relativism – he still adopts the viewpoint of 'life' enhancement as decisive – or scepticism is a matter for further debate. Nietzsche also influenced the development of modern relativism through his doctrine of perspectivism, i.e. all truth-claims depend on a particular perspective or standpoint. There is no neutral, 'Archimedean point' from which reality can be 'objectively observed.' The unbiased, objective quest for truth as such is a willow-the-wisp; every claim to know truth is an expression of personal interest, of the will-to-power. According to Nietzsche, "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing."<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche accepted the consequence that if interpretations are all we have, then we are unable to determine which view is true or better in any way:

The world with which you are concerned is false, i.e. it is not a fact but a fable and 'approximation on the basis of a meagre sum of observations.; it is "in flux," as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for – there is no "truth."<sup>58</sup>

The 'truth-game' is not worth the candle.

#### 4.4 Jean-Francois Lyotard

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924 – 1998), one of the premier philosophers of the postmodern movement, is best known for his book *The Postmodern Condition* which not only brought the term 'postmodern' into common usage but also explicitly established postmodernism as a relativist philosophy. This book provides one of the most frequently quoted definitions of postmodernism: "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>59</sup> By "metanarratives," (also called "grand narrative[s]"<sup>60</sup>), Lyotard means those 'stories' or intellectual frameworks by which we interpret the world and our activities and thereby provide meaning for the whole and give certain data the status of being facts, truths or real knowledge. For example, Marxism supplied revolutionaries around the world with a metanarrative encompassing the behavior of matter i.e. dialectical materialism, as well as the nature, direction and future outcome of human history, i.e. historical materialism. The Enlightenment metanarrative concerned the gradual triumph of reason over irrationality and the progress of

humankind not only in scientific knowledge but also in the progress towards rational freedom and a tolerant society. The Bahá'í metanarrative is "progressive revelation" according to which God sends successive Manifestations to guide humankind through its evolutionary development.

All of these metanarratives offer a complete or total vision by which all possible human action as well as other metanarratives may be interpreted and/or judged and for this reason Lyotard describes them as a "project of totalization."<sup>61</sup> The connotation of 'totalitarian' is fully intended by Lyotard who even describes metanarratives as "terrorist"<sup>62</sup> because they can be used to "eliminate[] or threaten[] to eliminate, a player [point of view, culture] from the language game one shares with them."<sup>63</sup> In the terms provided by Harre and Krausz, metanarratives are universalist, i.e. applying to all peoples at all times and places, they are objective and foundational.

One of the tasks of a metanarrative is the "legitimation of knowledge,"<sup>64</sup> which is to say that the metanarrative provides the foundational principles by which to distinguish 'real knowledge' or objective knowledge from error, folklore, myth or the babblings of the insane. Thus, the metanarrative becomes the gatekeeper of knowledge – and, by extension, the guardian of crucial binary oppositions necessary for a system of thought or social system to maintain itself. Examples of such binary oppositions are order / disorder; sane / insane; noumenal / phenomenal; true / untrue; primitive / civilized; competent / incompetent; knowledge / superstition; and rational / irrational. By means of these oppositions, metanarratives take on a prescriptive function not only for individuals but for entire societies who must conduct themselves personally and/or collectively to its standards which are enforced not just by institutions but by all those who accept the metanarrative. Lyotard (like Foucault) of course believes this prescriptive function imprisons us and the "incredulity toward metanarratives"<sup>65</sup> is a means of freeing ourselves from their rule. For Lyotard, this means freeing ourselves from modernity which "is identified with modern reason, Enlightenment, totalizing thought and philosophies of history."<sup>66</sup> Lyotard "rejects notions of universalist and foundational theory as well as claims that one method or set of concepts has privileged status."<sup>67</sup> He also rejects the notion that one metanarrative is more objectively true than the rest.

Metanarratives can only be evaluated on their own terms and within the context they provide; we must not import concepts

or procedures from other metanarratives to appraise other metanarratives. Like Kuhn's paradigms, metanarratives are incommensurable, each one being a universe to itself, and therefore, each one can be assessed only in relationship to itself. There is no objective, universally valid and necessary or foundational Archimedean point from which to judge.

#### 4.5 Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004) is the originator of deconstructionism, perhaps the most influential version of postmodernist philosophy developed so far. According to Jonathan Culler, one of deconstruction's foremost expositors

To deconstruct a discourse [text] is to show how it *undermines the philosophy it asserts*, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise.<sup>68</sup> It is important to note that this subversion occurs from within. As Derrida says, The movements of deconstruction *do not destroy structures from the outside*. They are not possible and effective nor can they take accurate aim except by inhabiting those structures ... Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure ...<sup>69</sup>

The text subverts or works against itself through its choice of words and phrases, the ambiguity of some words and phrases, rhetorical devices and/or imagery. Perhaps the best known example of this procedure is "*Plato's Pharmacy*," in which Derrida explores Plato's "*Phaedrus*":

The word *pharmakon* [remedy] is caught in a chain of significations. The play of that chain seems systematic. But the system here is not, simply, that of the intentions of an author who goes by the name of Plato.<sup>70</sup>

However, as Derrida points out, *pharmakon* means not only 'remedy' but also 'poison' not to mention 'spell' or 'drug' (as in hallucinogen) and this "chain of significations" serves to destabilise any simplistic, final or so-called objective interpretation of the text. Writing, which Thoth had introduced as a remedy for humankind's poor memory, is also a 'poison' that weakens memory, and may cast a 'spell' over us by making us think we have understood an idea when we have not.

If the *pharmakon* is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes

the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves,

reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (body / soul, good / evil, inside / outside, memory / forgetfulness, speech / writing, etc)... The pharmakon is the movement, the locus and the play: (the production of) difference.<sup>71</sup>

Each reading of 'pharmacy' evokes another, often contrary meaning; we recognize the difference (observe the spelling) between 'remedy' and 'poison' and in choosing one even if only for a moment, we 'defer' the other meanings which, despite being deferred, help complete our understanding of the text. These other meanings are referred to as 'supplements',<sup>72</sup> This process of recognizing difference and deferring Derrida calls *differance*' and in his view every text is an *endless play* of 'differance' as we defer, or momentarily push into the background, the meanings of various words. Each of these deferred meanings helps complete the full meaning of a word and for that reason, "The play of the supplement is indefinite."<sup>73</sup> Derrida makes the same point by stating that "writing structurally carries within itself (counts-discounts) the process of its own erasure and annulation..."<sup>74</sup> By "erasure" Derrida does not mean that one meaning of a word is absolutely excluded but rather that we read a word with awareness of all its other potential meanings instead of privileging one, usually conventional, meaning over all the others. We read the word with all of its meanings, aware of the ambiguity this causes in our understanding of the text itself.

It takes only minimal reflection to see how Derrida's deconstructionism supports relativism. If, as Derrida asserts the play of differance (note spelling) and supplement is "indefinite," then it follows logically the no interpretation can be foundational - since opposite readings are possible as we have already seen in "Plato's Pharmacy." Furthermore, no interpretation can be objective since there is no standpoint from which we can see the text 'as it really is.' Of course, no interpretation can be universal simply because any claims to universality are challenged by the existence of other, possibly contradictory interpretations. Finally, interpretations can only change - there is no progress from one to the next.

Derrida's deconstruction provides relativism with a particularly potent method of attack - each interpretation is shown to fail on its own terms, shown to undermine itself and lead to its opposite. This (apparently) undercuts any attempt to

assert the existence of an absolute, i.e. of a proposition claiming objectivity, universality and foundationalism. With this method (it is a method Derrida's objections notwithstanding) relativism can go on the offensive against all absolutist claims.

#### 4.6 Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984)

Like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault has been enormously influential in fields outside of his specialities of philosophy and social history. His writings cover such diverse topics as the social construction of madness<sup>75</sup> and sexuality<sup>76</sup>, methods in historiography<sup>77</sup>, penology<sup>78</sup>, the nature of power and discourse. He has had an incalculable effect on cultural studies, political theory, feminism and sociology.<sup>79</sup> While there may be some debate about whether or not Foucault is really postmodernist,<sup>80</sup> there is no debate about his standing as a thorough-going relativist.

Like Lyotard, Foucault rejects the concept of “grand narratives”, i.e. he does not believe that any global meta-narrative can explain all aspects of a civilization. He writes,

the theme and possibility of a total history begins to disappear ... The project of a total history is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle – material or spiritual – of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion ...<sup>81</sup>

Rather, he proposes what he calls “the new history”<sup>82</sup> which pays more attention to “discontinuity”<sup>83</sup>, to the “series, divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts, chronological specificities, particular forms of rehandling, possible types of relation.”<sup>84</sup> Just as Derrida proclaims the necessity of subverting any authoritative reading of a text, Foucault believes that “the tranquility with which they [the usual historical narratives driven by grand themes] are received *must be disturbed*”<sup>85</sup> by renounc[ing] all those themes whose function is to ensure infinite continuity of discourse.”<sup>86</sup> Historical discourse must be broken up into what Lyotard calls “little narratives” or *petits recits* because only when the glossed over differences become apparent will new fields of research be visible and available for investigation. We will become aware of discrepancies and differences that have been covered up by large sweeping unifying concepts and no longer lose sight of subtle but important shifts in meaning and usage. Each concept, person and event must be understood in terms of its exact specificity

in time, place and culture. There are no bridges between epistemes.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, Foucault's historiography not only stresses breaks and discontinuities rather than grand similarities, changes in ideas and practices rather than extended homogeneities, but also what he calls the "episteme" which is the 'soil' from which 'vegetation' of ideas, behaviors, experiences, customs and beliefs grows; it makes all these things possible and, at the same time, establishes their character and limitations. Epistemes are "the fundamental codes of a culture."<sup>88</sup> According to Foucault, an episteme

in a given period delimits in the totality of the experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in the field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognised to be true.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, an episteme determines truth, meaning, identity, value and reality at a specific time and place. People need not even be consciously aware of the episteme or its power in their lives though it creates the environment or context in which individuals think and speak; it controls what can be said and understood as meaningful. Great social, cultural and intellectual changes are the result of changes in the underlying episteme. Archaeologies study these epistemes strictly for themselves without drawing any universal conclusions about 'humankind' or other epistemes.

For our purposes, it is clear that Foucault's theory of epistemes disallows universalist claims, any foundational claims and any objectivity claims by any episteme. All epistemes are just interpretations with none possessing primacy in any way. This includes the episteme of western science and particularly, that of medicine. Because epistemes are incommensurable (like Kuhn's paradigms) there is no progress from one to the other but only change.

## 5. Richard Rorty (1931 - 2007)

Richard Rorty is one of the most influential philosophers in contemporary North America. Though relativism is a label he strenuously rejects, as we shall see, his denials are not very convincing. He attempts to distinguish his views from relativism by saying, "[T]here is a difference between saying that every community is as good as every other and saying that

we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify.”<sup>90</sup> After admitting that relativism is logically self-refuting, he clearly identifies his own position with the latter, supposedly non-relativistic view. To prove that he does not think all views are equally good, he asserts that a pragmatist like himself “thinks his views are better than the ‘realists,’ but he does not think his views correspond to the nature of things.”<sup>91</sup> Basically, he thinks his views are better because he is a “liberal” and, therefore, “more afraid of being cruel than anything else.”<sup>92</sup>

Rorty’s denials notwithstanding, it is difficult to take his claim that he is not a relativist at face value. Given his belief that statements cannot correspond to reality (and, therefore cannot be tested by reality), that rationality is simply a local cultural bias without general validity and that truth itself is a chimera, on what ground other than sheer dogmatic assertion can he claim that his philosophy is better? (Unless of course he relies on revelation which he does not.) He is also prepared to give up the quest for truth: “A scientist would rely on a sense of solidarity with the rest of her profession, rather than picture herself as battling through the veils of illusion, guided by the light of reason.”<sup>93</sup> If language games are incommensurable, if there is no rational or empirical way of ‘proving’ one view or another, then the alleged superiority of one view comes down to a dogmatic assertion of preference, i.e. of Nietzsche’s will-to-power. He wants to replace the whole idea of truth “with the desire for solidarity with that community”<sup>94</sup> In other words, he has replaced the quest for knowledge and truth with the ‘politics of knowledge’, i.e. the quest for consensus and solidarity. Most tellingly however, Rorty is unable to justify his beliefs in these reformed goals with anything more than a plea for us to recognise that his is a nicer way than its

the supposed alternatives. In the last analysis Rorty’s liberalism has nothing more than his preference to recommend it. Ironically, it is precisely such dogmatic assertion that his much recommended “edifying conversation” is supposed to replace. Judged by his own standards, Rorty’s views exemplify a thorough-going, i.e. radical relativism both in epistemology and ethics.

## 6 General Problems With Relativism

Before specifically examining relativism in regards to the Bahá’í Writings, we shall examine five serious philosophical problems with relativism.



The first of these problems is that if relativism is true, then it is impossible for anyone or any society/culture to be in error. Even if we show that a view lacks self-consistency, a relativist might claim it is simply our view that consistency is a requirement for viable positions. The problem with this necessary conclusion of relativism is that it is so contrary to our experience: we humans make all kinds of small and momentous mistakes on an on-going basis, and these mistakes indicate that at least for some things, there is a right and a wrong way, or more or less effective or efficient way. Moreover, some contentions are simply untrue: Franklin Roosevelt was not the dictator of the Soviet Union during the Great Terror of the 1930's<sup>95</sup>.

The second problem and largest group of problems is that relativism is self-undermining and self-refutation. The statement "all truth is relative" is either absolutely true or it is relatively true. If the first, then it refutes itself because it is an example of an absolute truth. If it is relatively true, it undermines itself - because that opens the possibility that at least some truths might be absolute. The same type of problems faces the proposition that we cannot know anything for sure, i.e. there can be no certain knowledge. If we can know that proposition for sure, then it refutes itself, and if we can't, then it is possible that we can know something for sure after all. The same problem bedevils the claim that there are no absolute truths. If this claim is meant absolutely it refutes itself, and if it is not meant absolutely, then at least some claims may be absolutely true. The same problem undermines the claim that there are no neutral standards of truth as well as the How could one prove this except by implicitly appealing a neutral standard, an Archimedean point above and beyond our perceptions? In short, relativism is a dogmatic assertion, not a provable contention.

The theories of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard illustrate the self-undermining and self-refuting problems of relativism. According to Derrida, no interpretation of data can be "privileged" over any other - yet this interpretation of the data about literature, history and the like is itself an interpretation subject to further deconstruction to show the opposite, i.e. that some interpretations are "privileged." Furthermore, this interpretation "privileges" itself by claiming universal validity for all possible interpretations. Similarly, Foucault declares that epistemes are incommensurable, i.e. that there is no neutral or objective Archimedean point from which we can judge between conflicting epistemes (or Kuhn's paradigms). However, that

judgment itself is only possible if we implicitly assume that we have a neutral standpoint that allows us to judge all other standpoints. In other words, Foucault “privileges” itself. Lyotard of course, has the same problem. The declaration that there can be no “grand narratives” drawing universal conclusions about history is a universal statement about history, and thus refutes itself. These serious problems in the arguments of major philosophers, make it clear that it is impossible to develop a version of relativism that does not undermine and refute itself. Without that there is no reason – other than dogmatic assertion – to be convinced by it.

The third problem also concerns the declaration there are different truths: what’s true for you is not true for me. In other words, there are no universal, foundational and objective truths. But this is highly counter-intuitive. Can any human being imagine a context in which things do not exist? Even if the whole world is an illusion, or even a mental delusion, then things exist albeit not in the usual way. This, of course, was Augustine’s<sup>96</sup> and Descartes’<sup>97</sup> great philosophical discovery: the illusory manner of existence of things cannot undo the fact that they do, in fact, exist. Nothing that we can think of can be denied ‘being.’ In other words, the concept of ‘being’ can provide an objective, universal, foundational which is to say, Archimedean standpoint on which to begin our thinking. Most important for our purposes is the fact that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá agrees with this position:

This theory [ that the external world is an illusion, is nothingness] is erroneous; for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, even illusions exist – as illusions but that is enough to give “a real and certain existence.” At first, this may not sound promising, but anyone familiar with the works of Thomas Aquinas and his successors in modern neo-Thomism will know how much can be built on this.<sup>99</sup>

The fourth problem with relativism is existential and ethical, not logical. It is difficult to accept the suggestion that the self-sacrifice of a Mother Theresa and the actions of a Dr. Mengele<sup>100</sup> are morally equal and that our condemnation of one and admiration for the other are simply expressions of personal taste and preference. Who, other than a psychopath or a “wrangler,” a person who argues for arguing’s sake, would contend that the actions of these two are morally on par?

Intellectually it may be possible to do so, but who, except a psychiatrically disturbed person would aspire to actually follow in Mengele's footsteps – or want a child to do so? Applied to law, the impracticality of relativism is just as glaring. Imagine a lawyer defending a serial killer on the ground that his client's view that murder is a fine hobby is just as valid as society's view that it's a heinous crime! Such a defence would rightly be laughed out of court. In other words, relativism has a fatal existential weakness: we can talk the talk but don't want anyone to walk the walk.

The fifth problem of relativism concerns its implicit anthropology, viz., its denial of a universal, objective and foundational human nature. If there is no human nature and humankind is infinitely malleable by environmental and social forces, then there can be no truth about human beings as such and therefore, no basis for a universal human moral code or a universal code of law such as the declaration of human rights, or a world-unifying religion or any basis for the unification of humankind. There is diversity but no unity. Such a view, promulgated by Boas, Benedict and Mead to name only the best known, suffers from two weaknesses. First, the human body, although subject to some minor variations is universally alike, and this includes brain functions. The body and the brain thus represents an objective, measurable substratum which constrains, shapes, and directs human responses to environmental and social influences. In short, human physiological functions – including brain functions – are universal. This is the physical basis for the unity of humankind. Second, contemporary anthropological studies such as Donald E Brown's *Human Universals* (as well as various successors) show that there exist well over one hundred<sup>101</sup> universal human traits such as facial expressions for happiness, fear, disgust and anger (basic emotions); anthropomorphization; use of metaphors and metonymies; systems of taxonomy; systems of counting; rituals and the self distinguished from others. In other words, there is a basic human nature which pre-disposes human beings to deal with the world and ourselves in similar ways.

## 7. The Bahá'í Writings and Anthropology

The Bahá'í Writings do not agree that there is no such thing as human nature. The first line of evidence in this regard are the passing references to human nature in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These passing references show that who remarks, the Master takes the existence of human nature for granted, as a given, self-evident fact. For example that the abuse of religion

makes "that which was a factor in the sublimity of human nature" into an instrument for its "degradation."<sup>102</sup> He tells us that "divine philosophy"

has for its object the sublimation of human nature, spiritual advancement, heavenly guidance for the development of the human race, attainment to the breaths of the Holy Spirit and knowledge of the verities of God.<sup>103</sup>

He tells us that Christ's disciples

were delivered from the animal characteristics and qualities which are the characteristics of human nature, and they became qualified with the divine characteristics ...<sup>104</sup>

None of these statements would make sense if there were no such thing as human nature.

The Writings also tell us a great deal about human nature, that is, they identify certain human traits and/or predispositions as universal, objective and foundational. For example, "his [man's] nature is threefold: animal, human and divine. The animal nature is darkness; the heavenly is light in light."<sup>105</sup> In other words, human nature is constituted by animal capacities or potentials, specifically human capacities or potentials and divine capacities or potentials. Sometimes these divine capacities are called our "spiritual susceptibilities" which must be awakened "in the hearts of mankind, to kindle anew the spirit of humanity with divine fires and to reflect the glory of heaven to this gloomy world of materialism."<sup>106</sup> The specifically human capacity or potential is our abstract reasoning power:

The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names--the human spirit and the rational soul--designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.<sup>107</sup>

The animal capacities, of course, are based on humankind's bodily needs as well as its instinctual nature. Speaking specifically in regards to morality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that our moral nature is constituted by two capacities, a lower and a higher:

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches

God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint.<sup>108</sup>

A survey of the Writings indicates that the Writings accept these attributes as universal, that is, applicable to all human beings regardless of time and place; as objective, that is, as not dependent on standpoint or, conversely, true from all standpoints; and foundational, that is, not susceptible to further breakdown and analysis. In other words, the Writing's view of human nature is not relative.

The third line of reasoning that shows the Bahá'í Writings do not have a relativist view of human nature can be found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks about human evolution: "But from the beginning of man's existence he is a distinct species"<sup>109</sup> and "For the proof of the originality of the human species, and of the permanency of the nature of man, is clear and evident."<sup>110</sup> Here, too, we observe, that humankind is credited with a nature that makes it identifiable and "distinct", in addition to being permanent, that is, "his species and essence undergo no change."<sup>111</sup> Thus, human nature has always been essentially what it is, which is to say, universal in time in addition to universal in space, i.e. planetary.

Finally, it is obvious why the Bahá'í Writings would insist on the absoluteness of human nature: without this basis, its teaching about the eventual unification of humankind into a single global commonwealth would lack a proper foundation. How could the human race be unified if all peoples did not have something in common, if there were no objectively real, foundational and universal capacity for rational thinking and decision making, for actualizing "spiritual susceptibilities", for freeing themselves from ancestral imitations and for adopting a global religion and loyalty? Indeed, the whole concept of progressive revelation makes no sense since without a human nature actualizing its latent potentialities, there would simply be change and not progress. Progress requires that some things change but also, that others are continuous since without such

continuity we could only say there is change. Whatever it is that changes is foundational, as well as objective and universal. Applied to man, this means, for example, that the historical appearances of human rationality can vary from place to place and time to time, but that the basic capacity for rationality remains the same.

The Bahá'í Writings show that on the subject of human nature they are not relativist.

## 8. Shoghi Effendi's Statements on Relativism

Superficially at least, some statements by Shoghi Effendi appear to support the view that the Bahá'í Writings advocate relativism. It is our contention that such is not actually the case. Here is one of the Guardian's statements:

"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...."<sup>112</sup>

The statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative" cannot have its seemingly obvious meaning since that would deny the statements that immediately follow about revelation being a "continuous and progressive process," that "all the great religions are divine in origin," that "they differ only in nonessential aspects of their doctrines" and so on. These claims - which are integral to the identity or essence of the Bahá'í revelation - are obviously intended as absolute truths which are foundational to the Bahá'í Faith, universal in scope and objectively true. They are not relative statements in the sense that their opposites are equally true or valid. In the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings, deconstructing these statements will not bring us to equally valid counter-truths; the denial of these claims is simply false. There is, moreover, no way a Bahá'í can reject any of them and/or accept their opposites and remain consistent with Bahá'í teachings. Of course Bahá'ís accept the fact that non-Bahá'ís may reject some or all of these claims, but this is regarded as error, rooted in the

failure to take the next step in humankind's religious evolution.

Just because we are all divine creations of God does not mean that all our opinions and views are correct. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá's says,

The divine Manifestations have been iconoclastic in Their teachings, *uprooting error*, destroying *false religious beliefs* and summoning mankind anew to the fundamental oneness of God.<sup>113</sup>

The fact that Manifestations have been "iconoclastic" means that They have evaluated various truth claims, found them wanting and swept them aside as erroneous. He also says,

And shouldst destroy them which destroy the earth" means that He will entirely deprive the neglectful; for the blindness of the blind will be manifest, and the vision of the seers will be evident; the ignorance and want of knowledge of the people of error will be recognized, and the knowledge and wisdom of the people under guidance will be apparent ...<sup>114</sup>

In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

"Twelve hundred and eighty years have passed since the dawn of the Muhammadan Dispensation, and with every break of day, these blind and ignoble people have recited their Qur'an, and yet have failed to grasp one letter of that Book! Again and again they read those verses which clearly testify to the reality of these holy themes, and bear witness to the truth of the Manifestations of eternal Glory, and still apprehend not their purpose. They have even failed to realize, all this time, that, in every age, the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man."<sup>115</sup>

For his part, Shoghi Effendi writes,

He [Bahá'u'lláh] insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions<sup>116</sup>

Thus it is quite possible for God's children to be blind and in error. These statements undermines any assertion that the Writings espouse a simple relativism which allows virtually any viewpoint to claim validity by appealing to its own special standpoint. Indeed, the whole concept of progressive revelation means that that not all standpoints are valid for all times and for all times, that religious history shows progress from one standpoint to the next which is why each Manifestation brings his own solutions.<sup>117</sup>

It almost goes without saying that any simplistic reading of "religious truth is not absolute but relative" falls into the trap of self-refutation and self-undermining. If this statement of "religious truth" is meant to be taken absolutely, then it obviously refutes itself by violating its own message. If, however, it is meant to be only relatively true, then the door is open to the possibility that at least some religious truth may be absolute, that is, universal, objective and foundational. That would defeat the entire purpose of the statement. Thus, there are good logical reasons for rejecting any simplistic reading of Shoghi Effendi's declaration.

If Shoghi Effendi's statement about religious truth being relative cannot mean that religious truth is relative in the sense of all possible viewpoints on an issue being equally valid, what does it mean? If we read the Guardian's entire statement, we find that it discusses progressive revelation, the historical changes of presentation undergone by their essentially unified principles. In other words, what changes are the surface, historical, phenomenal forms of the divine teachings but the essential teachings remain the same. In other words, what changes and is relative is the adapted, phenomenal form of religions but not the "eternal verities they enshrine,"<sup>118</sup> which are true for all time i.e., under all conditions past and future and for all humans, or, in philosophical terms, they are universal, objective and foundational.

From this we conclude that relativism does not apply to the "eternal verities"(universal, objective and foundational) but only to the way they may be expressed outwardly, or historically. Because they are "eternal," they are absolute, i.e. true independently of the standpoint, beliefs, hopes and fears of any individuals or collectives. (Though they are true independently of all standpoints, this does not prevent some from denying them for reasons of their own.) The historical or, as we may call it, outer, worldly, existential expression of the infinite potentials inherent in the "eternal verities" is what



varies, and not the essential teachings or the “eternal verities” themselves. These remain constant and actualise their implications for humankind through our evolution. It is obvious, of course, that the Bahá'í model of absolute, essential and constant truths given various existential expressions throughout human history cannot be accommodated by a concept of relativism according to which no perspective is essential or foundational, no concept is universal or applicable to all peoples at all times and no concept is objective, or true for all standpoints. Moreover, in violation of relativism, the Bahá'í Faith “distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions.”<sup>119</sup> Making these distinctions assumes that there is an Archimedean standpoint from which such judgments can be made – a notion flatly denied by relativism. Another aspect is that the Bahá'í model accepts the possibility that some views are simply erroneous. Such assertions are irreconcilable with any form of relativism.

Although the Bahá'í position is not relativist but absolutist on some issues – Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation for this age, that HIV is related to AIDS – it rejects as contrary to the doctrine of progressive revelation the absolutist suggestion that religious truth is revealed once and for all in full by any Manifestation. In regards to epistemology, the Bahá'í position may be described as ‘evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.’ The reason for calling it ‘Platonic’ is because there are “eternal verities” which obviously do not change and are true from all possible standpoints (unless one chooses to be deceived, but that is a different issue). Because they are eternal and unchanging, they resemble the Platonic ideas’ insofar as they are absolutely universal, objective and foundational: “This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”<sup>120</sup> Of course, it is evident that we do, in fact, have *some* knowledge of these “eternal verities” or other absolute truths but what and how much we know depends on our perspective or standpoint in history, on our spiritual, social, cultural development and what we learn from the Manifestations throughout human evolution. Thus, throughout history, we attain *partial glimpses* of the essential truths, the “eternal verities” as their various previously hidden potentials become known to us. That is why this position is described as evolutionary and perspectivist.

It is important that we not confuse and conflate ‘partial’ knowledge with ‘incorrect’ knowledge. If we only know plane

geometry, our knowledge of geometry is partial, but what we know about it is certainly correct: the interior angles of any plane triangle have always added up to 180 degrees and we have no reason to expect a change; Roosevelt was not the Soviet dictator during the Great Terror. In a more directly Bahá'í context, we *know that* Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation for this age, but we have not by any means discovered all the implications of that fact. Moreover, because the Bahá'í Faith has privileged, divinely appointed interpreters who occupy an Archimedean standpoint, it is possible to know that certain religious and philosophical claims are correct, though not fully understood by us.

Moreover, the existence of privileged interpreters also allows us to rule out particular perspectives and claims as untenable. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that a materialist approach to science and reality is inadequate<sup>121</sup> and that pantheism<sup>122</sup> and reincarnation<sup>123</sup> are untrue beliefs. This limits and constrains how Bahá'ís may understand the Writings, i.e. these perspectives are ruled out of bounds. On the positive side, “although human souls are phenomenal, they are nevertheless immortal, everlasting and perpetual.”<sup>124</sup> This truth, however partial or perspectival our understanding of it may be, is nonetheless true universally i.e. from all perspectives, foundationally and objectively. A contrary perspective is simply an error, both in the factual sense and existentially insofar as it contributes to human “degradation.”<sup>125</sup>

## 9. Relativism versus Relationalism<sup>126</sup>

Whereas in regards to epistemology, the Bahá'í position may be described as ‘evolutionary Platonic perspectivism,’ in regards to ontology, i.e. the theory of reality, it is best described as ‘relationalism.’ Relationalism is based on the belief that all things exist in relationship to one another,

For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings.<sup>127</sup>

Speaking specifically of humankind, the Master says, the existence and perfection of humankind

is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the mode of their combination, and to *mutual influence*. When all these are gathered together, then man exists.<sup>128</sup>

In other words, things exist relationally to each other, but this must not be confused with ontological relativism according to which

What exists for human beings is relative to the concepts they possess and the procedures of enquiry with which their culture equips them ... *Ontological relativists are not saying that it is just what people believe exists* [that would bring us back to epistemological relativism] *that varies from culture to culture, but something much stronger, that what exists can only be said to exist for this or that culture.*<sup>129</sup>

The logical consequence of this immediately makes its untenability clear: what we don't know doesn't exist – and, therefore, according to this view, shouldn't be able to hurt us. But we know this is false. The world's Aboriginal Peoples, for example, who knew neither gunpowder nor measles and had no concept of either, were very seriously hurt by both. Here we have historical proof that either individual or collective human perception does not constitute reality, that regardless of how we may constitute reality, factors not included in our construction may well be at work and able to affect us whether we recognise them or not.

Let us examine relationalism more closely. Unlike any form of relativism, it does not mean that there are standpoints from which real relationships can be validly denied and said not to exist. Doing that would make the nature of reality itself dependent on the perceiver – which is a form of ontological relativism. For relationalism, relationships are real whether or not they are perceived by anyone; for example, the relationship between fire and gunpowder has always been such that one should be extremely careful introducing them to each other. In other words, relationalism is a form of ontological realism, i.e. the belief that reality is independent of our ontological conceptions and schemes. Relationalism recognises that because things exist in relationship to one another, they may exhibit different characteristics in regards to different things. Indeed, they can even display opposite attributes with different things. Sea water, for example, allows ocean plants to thrive whereas it kills land plants. Exercise that may be valuable stimulation for one person's heart may kill another person. However, it is important to realise that relationalism still allows us to say that certain statements are absolutely true, e.g. that sea water is deadly for daisies, that there is no viewpoint from which this is not true. We may not completely understand all the details

about why this is true, but the assertion of the opposite is simply false. Thus, relationalism is able to retain the concept of truth and of distinguishing among a wildering wilderness of images/perspectives. It is able to accommodate the idea that at least some statements are universal, objective and foundational, and that others are in error.

Thus, it is plain that relationalism and relativism are not the same and must not be confused and conflated. The Bahá'í Writings are relationalist and not relativist.

Let us observe relationalism in the following statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá':

This dust beneath our feet, as *compared with our being, is nonexistent*. When the human body crumbles into dust, we can say it has become nonexistent; therefore, its dust in relation to living forms living forms of human being is as nonexistent, but in its own sphere it is existent, it has its mineral being. Therefore, it is well proved that absolute nonexistence is impossible; it is only relative.<sup>130</sup>

The statement says that in its relationship to human being, dust is non-existent although, "in its own sphere", in relationship to itself, dust exists. It is important to notice that it is not merely a matter of opinion whether or not dust is dead in relationship to or relative to the human being - this is presented as an ontological fact. There is no cognitive relativism about this; no matter what standpoint we choose to observe this fact, it will be the same, i.e. it is universal, objective and foundational. From this example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' draws a general conclusion: "absolute non-existence" does not exist, "it [non-existence] is "only relative." Here, too, we have a universal claim that is not standpoint dependent but is offered as a principle of universal ontology. That our understanding of this principle will grow and expand throughout our evolutionary history is not in question, but the basic insight reflects an abiding truth on which we have one true perspective. This brings us back to the 'evolutionary Platonic perspectivism' where we may get various successive perspectives on the "eternal verities" or unchallengeably true propositions, as, for example that "nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable."<sup>131</sup> Nonexistence is always non-existence in relationship to something and existence is always existence in relationship to something.

What follows is another statement which illustrates the difference between relationalism and relativism:

Therefore, though the world of contingency exists, in relation to the existence of God it is nonexistent and nothingness. Man and dust both exist, but how great the difference between the existence of the mineral and that of man! The one in relation to the other is nonexistence. In the same way, *the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence*. Thus it is evident and clear that although the beings exist, *in relation to God and to the Word of God they are nonexistent*.<sup>132</sup>

Again we observe that in these statements the attributes of existence and nonexistence are not simply matters of opinion or viewpoint in the relativistic sense of our being able to hold the opposite view with equal validity. There is, for example, no standpoint from which creation is not contingent and dependent upon God, nor is there a standpoint from which God Himself depends on creation. (This should not be confused with the claim that humans may devise various concepts of God; the concepts, but not God Himself are dependent on man.) This is true even of the "First Mind" or "First Will": "for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God is nothingness."<sup>133</sup> This ontological principle also applies at the most humble level "the life of the nail in relation to the life of the eye is nonexistent."<sup>134</sup> The failure to adequately consider the relational nature of existence causes some thinkers to conclude that the world is an illusion

This theory [that the external world is an illusion, is nothingness] is *erroneous*; for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, *in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this*.<sup>135</sup>

Aside from the characterization of a particular view as "erroneous" - which implicitly denies epistemological relativism - this passage shows that things are involved in two kinds of relationship, a relationship to others or not-self (in this example, God) and a relationship to itself, its own "condition of being." All things thus have a double nature; more importantly they can have apparently opposite attributes in different relationships. Furthermore, each of these relationships is absolutely true and not relative. In respect to God, the world does not exist - and there is no alternative standpoint from which to validly assert the opposite. In regards to itself, the world exists - and as Augustine and Descartes know, there is no logically defensible standpoint from which to assert the opposite. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that it is "futile" to deny

what he says demonstrates the universal, objective and foundational nature of his claim, and thereby illustrates a vital difference between relationalism and relativism.

What follows is an application of relationalism to the human soul after death.

*In the same way, the souls who are veiled from God, although they exist in this world and in the world after death, are, in comparison with the holy existence of the children of the Kingdom of God, nonexistent and separated from God.*<sup>136</sup>

Here, too, we observe the double-relation: in regards to themselves as well as the world and “the world after death”, these veiled souls exist, but in regards to the “children of the Kingdom”, they are nonexistent. Each statement is true, and not subject to equally valid contradiction as it would be with relativism; together these relations constitute the being of those particular souls. There is no standpoint from which a soul could be “separated from God” and still exist since that would assert the independence of the created from the Creator. Nor is there any standpoint that could validly assert the nonexistence of a soul “in the world and the world after death” while still existing for God, because that would be to declare the world more powerful than God.

Relationalism also applies to ethics according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*a scorpion is evil in relation to man; a serpent is evil in relation to man; but in relation to themselves they are not evil ... The epitome of this discourse is that it is possible that one thing in relation to another may be evil, and at the same time within the limits of its proper being it may not be evil. Then it is proved that there is no evil in existence; all that God created He created good. This evil is nothingness; so death is the absence of life.*<sup>137</sup>

Once again, we note how the relationship to not-self/other is distinguished from relationship to self along with the assertion that nothing is evil “within the limits of its proper being.”<sup>138</sup> This relationship to itself is the ontological foundation for the teaching that God’s creation is good; all things are good in and of themselves. In addition, this passage also reinforces the distinction between relationalism and relativism because there is no standpoint from which we may correctly say that the scorpion is evil in regards to itself because that would be to deny the inherent goodness of God’s creation. In other words,

we know this truth from a privileged standpoint from which we may reject the contrary view as false.

Similar thinking applies to morality as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The sin in Adam is relative to His position. Although from this attachment there proceed results, nevertheless, attachment to the earthly world, in relation to attachment to the spiritual world, is considered as a sin. The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the Near Ones.*<sup>139</sup>

This statement exemplifies relationalism not relativism because it is not a matter of questioning Adam's sin – which is flatly asserted to be sin and not subject to contrary perspectives according to which it is not – but only that what is factually a sin in relationship to Adam is not necessarily a sin in relationship to other beings. This is consistent with relationalism because, as already explained, an entity may exhibit different qualities in relationship to different things because it interacts differently with each. Thus, what is good in the “righteous” is “sin” for the “Near Ones.” The statement that “The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the Near Ones” is not dependent on perspective but is offered as a truth that is universal, objective and foundational. There is no perspective that could prove 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrong.

Another example of relationalism can be found in *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*:

*Although a brief example hath been given concerning the beginning and ending of the relative world, the world of attributes, yet a second illustration is now added, that the full meaning may be manifest. For instance, let thine Eminence consider his own self; thou art first in relation to thy son, last in relation to thy father.*<sup>140</sup>

Here, too, we find no suggestion that the claim “thou art first in relation to they son, last in relation to thy father” is subject to equally valid contradictory claim, which is to say that this statement is universally, objectively and foundationally true. In other words, this statement implicitly assumes there exists a neutral, Archimedean standpoint from which its claim can be made, thereby ruling it out of consideration as an example of relativism.

The passage goes on to declare that “first” and “last” as well as “outward appearance” and “inward being” are “four states” that are “true of thyself.”<sup>141</sup> If we allowed a truly relativistic reading instead of a perspectivist reading, the truth of this

passage would no longer be universalist, objectivist and foundational – and thus would lose its value as a guide in the quest for religious truth.

Continuing this passage, we read,

*These statements are made in the sphere of that which is relative, because of the limitations of men. Otherwise, those personages who in a single step have passed over the world of the relative and the limited, and dwelt on the fair plane of the Absolute, and pitched their tent in the worlds of authority and command--have burned away these relativities with a single spark, and blotted out these words with a drop of dew. And they swim in the sea of the spirit, and soar in the holy air of light. Then what life have words, on such a plane, that "first" and "last" or other than these be seen or mentioned! In this realm, the first is the last itself, and the last is but the first.<sup>142</sup>*

Here Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that we live on a “relative” ontological plane where everything exists in relation to other things and thus suffer the problem of being limited by particular perspectives i.e. relating to one thing in one way and to something else in another. However, it is possible to surpass this relational plane – to “burn[] away these relativities,” to transcend the differences of words and attain a plane where first and last are one and the same, i.e. where things do not exist relationally as on this earthly plane. What precisely that mode of existence is we are powerless to say because the words have been blotted out “with a drop of dew.” We have reached the limit of rationality. An adherent of philosophical relativism must, of course, claim that this may be true from a particular perspective but that the direct contrary view is equally possible – and there is Archimedean standpoint from which to judge between the alternatives. The problem is that nothing here suggests this is what Bahá'u'lláh means.

## 10. A Test Case<sup>143</sup>

In his well-know article “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*,” Moojan Momen claims that relativism can reconcile ontological dualism and ontological monism. Writing about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden treasure,’*” Momen contends that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adopts a relativist approach to achieve “a reconciliation of the dichotomy”<sup>144</sup> between an ontological dualism asserting that “there is a fundamental difference between the human soul and



the Absolute”<sup>145</sup> and an ontological monism stating that “there is no fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute.”<sup>146</sup> The case of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary*” is intended to be paradigmatic in solving the apparent problem between the teaching of the essential unity of all religions and humankind’s conflicting religious beliefs.

It is the contention of this paper that Momen’s use of relativism as a solution to the monism/dualism conflict in the Writings is a supposed ‘solution’ to a non-existent problem. There is, as we shall see, no monist position in the Writings. But is this really the case? After his exposition of both views, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ says,

But to this servant all these expositions and questions, stations and states are complete *in their own station* without defect or flaw. For although the object being viewed is the same, nevertheless the viewpoints and stations of these mystic knowers is different. Each viewpoint, *with respect to the person who is in that station* is perfect and complete.<sup>147</sup>

Analysis shows that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá strictly confines his remarks to the *subjective* criteria for truth: given their own presuppositions and criteria, the advocates of each viewpoint reason correctly and attain a conclusion that is consistent with their spiritual conditions as “knowers.” In other words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument is *subjectively* epistemological – concerned with the “knowers” and not with what is objectively known and the quality of their knowledge, with the perceiver and not with the perceived. He is not talking about what actually is the case but rather about what the viewer *thinks* is the case because of his presuppositions, nature and spiritual condition. Once this distinction is noted, it becomes clear that his judgment about the two viewpoints has no ontological implications at all.<sup>148</sup> Consequently, seeing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words as a relativist reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism is to mistake a rather studiously neutral statement about two kinds of viewers for an endorsement of both their opinions.<sup>149</sup> Such is patently not the case. Momen quotes the following passage to support his case for relativism:

It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision. We shall give an example of this, that its meaning may become fully clear: Consider the visible sun; although it shineth with one radiance upon all things, and at the behest of the King

of Manifestation bestoweth light on all creation, yet in each place it becometh manifest and sheddeth its bounty according to the potentialities of that place. For instance, in a mirror it reflecteth its own disk and shape, and this is due to the sensitivity of the mirror; in a crystal it maketh fire to appear, and in other things it showeth *only* the effect of its shining, but not its full disk. And yet, through that effect, by the command of the Creator, it traineth each thing according to the quality of that thing, as thou observest.<sup>150</sup>

While this passage certainly supports perspectivalism or relationalism – there are many perspectives on or relations to the sun and each of them originates with the wayfarer – this passage clearly indicates that not all perspectives are equal: “in a mirror it reflecteth its own disk and shape, and this is due to the sensitivity of the mirror.” In other words, the mirror reflects the sun more accurately, faithfully, adequately than in other things which show “*only* the effect of its shining, but not its full disk.” Each reflects “according to the quality of that thing” but nowhere is it claimed that the quality is everywhere equal. Indeed, in this very image Bahá'u'lláh suggests an Archimendean standpoint from which to judge the reflections: the more one is sensitive like a mirror, the more closely we will reflect the light, “disk and shape” of the sun. This passage does not support a relativist reading.

If Momen's reading is correct, it would follow that 'Abdu'l-Bahá assumes that the spiritual condition, nature and understanding of the believer are by themselves sufficient to determine the objective *correctness* or *truthfulness* of a belief. However, as we have shown with the foregoing passage, the Writings do not espouse such a subjectivist theory of truth.<sup>151</sup> If They did, they would be maintaining that standpoint and spiritual condition is sufficient to establish objective truthfulness – which in turn would prevent Them from dismissing some beliefs as “vain imaginings,”<sup>152</sup> “error,”<sup>153</sup> and “the lowest depths of ignorance and foolishness”<sup>154</sup>.

In attempting to prove that relativism can serve as the “basis for a Baha'i metaphysics,” Momen endeavours to show how it can resolve the conflict between monism and dualism by citing apparently ‘monist’ passages in the Writings. Our contention is that these passages are not monist at all. For example, Bahá'u'lláh's injunction, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee”<sup>155</sup> is not really monist. Because we can find God's universal presence reflected in the

mirrors of our hearts<sup>156</sup> does not mean that we have become ontologically one with God's Being. Moreover, this passage maintains the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived (God) – a fact which effectively precludes a monist interpretation.

Another passage Momen quotes to support a monist interpretation of the Writings is found in *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. Some wayfarers behold various colors, but “some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself.”<sup>157</sup> A careful reading of this passage shows that its concern is epistemological – visionary – and not ontological, it is about perceiving not about the *being* of that which is perceived. To be ontologically monist, this passage would have to assert that “the place of appearance”<sup>158</sup> and the sun itself are actually one, that the person who gazes is one with what he gazes upon. However, this passage also preserves the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived and, therefore, cannot serve as an example of a monist tendency in the Writings. Indeed, it is explicitly dualist.

The following is another passage quoted to support a monist tendency in the Writings:<sup>159</sup> “Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.”<sup>160</sup> There is no suggestion here or in immediately subsequent statements, that the seeker becomes ontologically one with God since the passing away of the world or self or loss of awareness of them as separate entities – does not imply such actual, ontological one-ness. This passage is not really ontologically monist – and therefore, relativism does not need relativism to reconcile with dualism. Furthermore, we should recall Bahá'u'lláh's condemnation of those who, “deluded by their idle fancies, have conceived all created things as associates and partners of God.”<sup>161</sup> There is no way that the monist vision can be true without erasing the ontological distinctions between God and man – a concept that requires us to become one of God's ‘partners.’

This statement and others like it irrevocably invalidate any monist views regardless of our sincerely they might be held. Sincerity is not a measure of truth, since erroneous views can be sincerely held.

Finally, it is claimed that the Bahá'í belief that only God has absolute existence and that human existence is contingent is “in essence a monist position.”<sup>162</sup> Such is far from being the case.

First, the fact that only God possess absolute existence means

only that creation has lesser degrees of being, not that all things are ontologically one with God. Indeed, to insist on such identity is, in effect, to insist that God is nothing (like creation) and that creation is absolute (like God.) Both positions are untenable for Bahá'ís. Second, the assertion of ontological oneness between Creator and created means that God is somehow present – albeit in different forms – in His creation. This position would be “appearance through manifestation”<sup>163</sup> which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá categorically rejects as “quite impossible.”<sup>164</sup> The reason is straight forward: for the human soul to become one with God would be for it to leave its own condition as human, and this is rejected:

*but it [the human soul] never leaves its own condition, in which it continues to develop. For example, the reality of the spirit of Peter, however far it may progress, will not reach to the condition of the Reality of Christ; it progresses only in its own environment.*

*Look at this mineral. However far it may evolve, it only evolves in its own condition; you cannot bring the crystal to a state where it can attain to sight. This is impossible.*<sup>165</sup>

This statement makes it clear that there is absolutely no standpoint from which the soul can alter its essentially human condition and become ontologically one with God. To become one with God, also violates Baha'u'llah's injunction not to “transgress the limits of one's own rank and station.”<sup>166</sup> This re-emphasizes the dualist position: man is always man and God is always God. In other words, we always remain in one of the three stations of existence: “Know that the conditions of existence are limited to the conditions of servitude, of prophethood and of Deity.”<sup>167</sup> Man is always in the (ontological) condition of servitude and nothing can change that, either in this life or the life to come. Furthermore, in the “Commentary on the Islamic Tradition, ‘I was a Hidden Treasure ...’”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá categorically states his own position that “the path to knowing the innermost Essence of the Absolute is *closed to all beings* ... How can the reality of non-existence ever understand the ipseity of being?”<sup>168</sup> Since the knowledge of God is utterly impossible, then no one – regardless of spiritual condition – can attain the necessary and sufficient conditions for obtaining such knowledge which in effect denies the possibility of unity with God.

Because of the vast ontological gulf between the two<sup>169</sup> – a difference of kind, not of degree – it is impossible for God to become man or vice versa as held by some mystics. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

describes this view, which he identifies with the Sufis but which also applies to Christian incarnationism, as “evident error.”<sup>170</sup> There is no way that “the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms.”<sup>171</sup> He also rejects the view that man may become God; he asks rhetorically, “[H]ow can the phenomenal reality embrace the Preexistent Reality?”<sup>172</sup> Bahá'u'lláh makes the same point when He says, “*no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being ... every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend [contain, encircle] His Essence.*”<sup>173</sup> He reinforces this point by asking rhetorically, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun?”<sup>174</sup> In other words, the ontological difference between the Creator and the created is too great to be overcome by the mere efforts of humankind.

Not only does ontological monism undermine Bahá'í theology because it makes Manifestations superfluous as mediators between God and humankind, but it also ignores logic. First, if man truly becomes one with God, the Creator of all other beings, then the claimant in effect becomes his own creator, which is to say, he exists before he exists because God logically precedes all other beings. This is not logically possible. Second, the relationship of dependence on God can never be revoked or negated in any way. God is the perpetually indispensable ‘necessary and sufficient condition’ for the existence of anything other than Himself. Consequently, there can be no possible point of view, position or stance within creation where the distinction between Creator and created is overcome, where the primordial relationship of dependence on God is invalidated, or effectively negated in some way. To claim otherwise – as ontological monism does – is to ignore Baha'u'llah's warning that “He hath assigned *no associate* unto Himself *in His Kingdom* ...”<sup>175</sup>

However, we must remember that the denial of ontological union or oneness with God does not preclude an ethical oneness in which man submits to or harmonizes his personal will with the will of God. This ethical monism is not only allowed but even encouraged by the Writings as an essential human goal. Nevertheless, we must not misinterpret this ethical harmonization as an ontological union.

The conclusion that ontological or even cognitive/epistemological monism are not an option is inescapable on the basis of the Writings. The monism/dualism dichotomy simply doesn't exist in the Writings, and, therefore, requires no solution. Moreover, even if such a dichotomy

existed, to propose relativism as a 'solution' creates more philosophical problems than it solves. This is what we shall demonstrate next.

## 11: Relativism: A Basis for Metaphysics?

We are still left with the question of whether relativism be "a basis for Bahá'í metaphysics"<sup>176</sup> or ontology as Momen claims. Analysing this issue in light of the serious philosophical problems entailed in espousing relativism leads us to the conclusion that this is not a tenable proposal. As we shall see, applied to ethical subjects, relativism undercuts the very possibility of any normative morality, in effect, reducing morals, vice and virtues, the praiseworthy and the blameworthy to a matter of personal taste and preference. Applied to epistemology, it undercuts the very possibility progress in human intellectual, scientific, technological and spiritual knowledge, reducing such progress to mere change. It denies as well the bedrock idea that some cultures are more advanced than others, as pointed out by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in various statements.<sup>177</sup> In the realm of religion, it denies the very the foundational Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation, since, according to relativism, there can be no progress, only change. As already seen, relativism makes the entire concept of a metaphysics untenable.

According to Momen, there can be no 'correct' or 'incorrect' interpretation of certain experiences and statements as monist or dualist because all knowledge "is relative [to the speaker's standpoint] .... This may be termed a cognitive or epistemic relativism."<sup>178</sup>

There are several problems here. The first, and perhaps most obvious is that if there can be no correct or incorrect interpretations - by what criteria could we make such judgments since all interpretations are correct from their various perspectives? - it will be impossible to do metaphysics at all. Philosophy and metaphysics are more than free-style expression of viewpoints: "metaphysics [is] most generally the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution and structure of reality."<sup>179</sup> There are questions of logical correctness and consistency to consider, not to mention the use, analysis and critiquing of factual evidence and its meaning. When all opinions are correct from their perspectives and subsequently immune from evaluation, how could we ever reach even the simplest conclusions about "Bahá'í metaphysics" i.e. about the allegedly "Bahá'í" understanding of the "constitution

and structure of reality"? If that is the case, we cannot claim to have a "Bahá'í" or any other kind of metaphysics: all we have is a collection or heap of viewpoints many of which exclusive to one another. This completely undermines the possibility of developing a coherent metaphysics - or a coherent ethics or code of law for that matter.<sup>180</sup>

For relativism, there is an infinite number of equally valid 'realities' which can be constructed by human beings, individually and/or collectively. These may or may not be reconcilable. There is no common reality or world for all people. As a result, there is no common reality or world for all people. As seen immediately above, this leads to the impossibility of developing an even minimally coherent metaphysic - theory of reality - or general world-view (Weltanschauung). Even more, it also makes the entire Bahá'í project impossible. The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is to provide a spiritual framework in which all the religious dispensations can find their place and be elevated to a new level,<sup>181</sup> and in which the dream of a unified world order can be achieved. Such unity requires that to a considerable degree we share a common reality, that at least a sufficient number of people agree about the nature of reality, the nature of man and the world we live in. The lack of such a common viewpoint or framework is precisely what plagues the world today and prevents cooperative action. Among other things, the Bahá'í Faith

proclaims its readiness and ability to fuse and incorporate the contending sects and factions into which they have fallen into a universal Fellowship, *functioning within the framework, and in accordance with the precepts, of a divinely conceived, a world-unifying, a world-redeeming Order.*<sup>182</sup>

Relativism, which has no way of distinguishing true from false, or the useful from the counterproductive or simply irrelevant, is not capable of developing such a unifying vision and framework and thus fails to meet the desperate need of humankind for unity. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements,"<sup>183</sup> says Bahá'u'lláh, and thereby provides us with at least one criterion by which we can distinguish among contending viewpoints. This allows us to escape the quicksand of competing views and - unlike relativism - start the process of selecting among them.

Another severe problem with relativism and the Bahá'í Faith is that there can be no universally valid ethical prescriptions

since ethical prescriptions are matters of individual and/or collective choice: there is no common ethical world for all people. However, it is precisely the aim of the Bahá'í Faith to provide a common spiritual and ethical framework within which all of humanity can live and work together. That is why the Faith promulgates teachings on the importance of justice, of human rights, honesty, truthfulness, loyalty, moderation, knowledge, spirituality and so on. These are not just a matter of opinion according to the Writings; they are objectively real virtues consonant with the best in the nature of man: "The Prophets come into the world to guide and educate humanity so that the animal nature of man may disappear and the divinity of his powers become awakened."<sup>184</sup> There is no question here of the equal validity of opposing viewpoints: "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy."<sup>185</sup> Here, too, we find that relativism is out of step with the goals of the Bahá'í Faith.

Furthermore, relativism makes the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation impossible along with the Bahá'í Faith's belief in scientific, social, economic and political progress. To assert that a certain development is 'progressive' requires that we attain a universal, objective and foundational Archimedean point from which to make such a judgment. Relativism, of course, denies that such an Archimedean standpoint exists; we can only assert that things change, not that they 'progress' – whatever that might mean. Indeed, relativism must also recognise as equally valid the view that progressive revelation is false, and 'imperialist dogma' for the conquest or subjugation of other religions. Such a position, of course, cannot be harmonized with the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, undermining of progressive revelation undermines one of the essential identifying features of the Faith.

Nor can we escape the fact that relativism makes the concept of a divine Manifestation untenable because a Manifestation has a privileged, universal, objective and foundational Archimedean standpoint which make His pronouncements normative for all of humankind and all cultures at this time. IOW, His pronouncements are universal, objective and foundational. Relativism is simply incapable of recognizing the existence of such a being – though by its own principles it cannot rule out His existence – and thereby plunge itself into self-refutation again. Because what is revealed by the Manifestation is universal, objective and foundational, there is no room for equally valid but contrary viewpoints. If



contradictory viewpoints were just as valid, why would we need the Manifestation? Everyone can be his own manifestation! Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that this solution is not acceptable for the simple reason that only one genuine Physician exists for the world's ills.

*At one time it [the world] hath been agitated by contentions and disputes, at another it hath been convulsed by wars, and fallen a victim to inveterate diseases. Its sickness is approaching the stage of utter hopelessness, inasmuch as the true Physician is debarred from administering the remedy, whilst unskilled practitioners are regarded with favor, and are accorded full freedom to act...*<sup>186</sup>

This passage makes it clear that there is no alternative to the remedies prescribed by the “unerring Physician,”<sup>187</sup> that there is only one Physician whose viewpoint matters. Baha'u'llah's “Book itself is the “Unerring Balance” established amongst men,”<sup>188</sup> a statement demonstrating the Manifestation's absolute “epistemic privilege.” Such a position conflicts with relativism in all its forms.

Yet another problem undermines relativism: as Plato pointed out in the *Theatetus*, relativism makes it impossible for anyone to be wrong, misled or simply perverse in their thinking. Maintaining that everyone is correct from his own standpoint is tantamount to saying that people cannot err, and, in effect, have essential infallibility. Not only does this violate common life-experience, but it also leavers us unable to explain references to “the divines and the foolish of this age,”<sup>189</sup> to “certain foolish ones who, after having ascended into the heavens of their idle fancies,”<sup>190</sup> or to those who are “ignorant of the mysteries that lie enfolded within him.”<sup>191</sup> These quotations make it clear that relativism is not an accurate description of what we find in the Writings. It would, of course, also present insurmountable ethical problems, we would not be able to distinguish between the actions of a Mother Theresa and a Dr. Mengele or Stalin's chief butcher Lavrentiy Beria.

Relativism also confuses and conflates two distinct propositions: (a) knowledge is relative to standpoint and (b) all viewpoints are equally correct.. Two hidden assumptions should also be mentioned. The first is that there is no Archimedean standpoint from which to judge amongst competing views, and the second is that everyone interprets his viewpoint accurately. The fact that knowledge is relative to standpoint does not

logically lead to the conclusion that all perspectives are equally valid. Making that leap is precisely what distinguishes relativism from relationalism and evolutionary Platonic perspectivism. The Bahá'í Writings certainly believe that knowledge is relative to standpoint but they do not believe all perspectives are equal. If that were the case, how could we find such passages as "Even as it is evident in this day how the people of error are, by their countenance, known and distinguished from the followers of divine Guidance."<sup>192</sup> Or take the following:

He is indeed a true believer in the unity of God who, in this Day, will regard Him as One immeasurably exalted above all the comparisons and likenesses with which men have compared Him. He hath erred grievously who hath mistaken these comparisons and likenesses for God Himself.<sup>193</sup>

There is no suggestion in either of these quotations that those who are in error are correct from their own particular standpoint.

It is important as well to mention the self-refutational problems of relativism because Moojan Momen, in his article, "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*" claims that "there can be no "absolute statements about Reality."<sup>194</sup> The problem is that this itself is an absolute statement about reality and rules itself out of court. Once we understand the self-refutational nature of such relativist pronouncements, we can see why they cannot form the basis of any programmatic thought and thus lose any epistemic privilege to become the "basis of Bahá'í metaphysics." Furthermore if such categorical statements about reality are forbidden, what are Bahá'ís to make of the assertion "God exists"? For Bahá'ís, this declaration cannot be anything less than absolute, i.e. universal, objective and foundational, since 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself provided "proofs and evidences of the existence of God"<sup>195</sup> without any conditions on that conclusion. It is affirmed absolutely as true from all possible viewpoints and because nothing can be added to make it more or less true than it already is. Furthermore, from God's absolute existence, we can - contrary to Momen's claim - make indisputable ontological deductions. For example, God's existence puts Him at the head of a hierarchy of being whose other members are existentially dependent on Him. This dependence is true from all possible viewpoints within creation. Denying or relativizing this irreparably undermines the foundations of the Bahá'í theology.

Another problem is that the denial of "absolute

statements about reality”<sup>196</sup> in effect asserts that all viewpoints are equally true (or false) which in turn undermines the central doctrine of “progressive revelation.”<sup>197</sup> Guided by successive Manifestations, humans attain ever more adequate – though never perfect – knowledge of reality. We were “created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization.”<sup>198</sup> This injunction implicitly suggests an *evolutionary Platonic perspectivism* which asserts that knowledge – while never perfect – is nonetheless genuinely improving, i.e. being augmented, becoming more accurate and therefore, progressive.

A fourth difficulty: if we argue that the statements of the Manifestations are privileged, but human interpretations of these statements are not, we face the problem of vacuousness. When all readings are equally true, then – because some readings contradict others – none are. Consequently, it becomes impossible to teach the Writings or even to discuss them since – all interpretations being equally accurate – no one knows what the Writings actually say. What is the point of becoming a Bahá'í or offering the Faith's teachings as a solution to a wide variety of world problems if no one knows what the Writings ‘really’ mean? How can the Writings be explicated or defended if what opponents of the Faith says is as true as what the proponents say? Obviously, the very *raison d'être* of the Bahá'í Faith is removed by an unqualified epistemological relativism.

How can we distinguish various degrees of truthfulness without infringing on every Bahá'ís right to interpret the Writings for him or herself? This paper contends that the Bahá'í community has adopted negative gate-keeping as a means of retaining doctrinal cohesion. Any understanding of the Writings is acceptable if it is not ‘forbidden,’ that is, inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Sacred Text and/or the guidance from ‘Abdu'l-Bahá , Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. Such negative gate-keeping would bar all forms of monism since they assert the possible one-ness of God and the creature. By adopting negative gate-keeping, Bahá'ís have, in fact, adopted inasmuch as negative gate-keeping stipulates that within the framework provided by Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá , Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, all understandings that are not forbidden are equally valid or true.

The fifth problem with Momen's views on relativism is his interpretation of Shoghi Effendi's statement that Bahá'í Faith's “teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.”<sup>199</sup> He appears to

understand this as a blanket relativism applicable to all subjects, but such is not the case. The context of this statement is progressive revelation in regards to which we must recall Abdu'l-Baha's statements that "every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time."<sup>200</sup> It is the "material ordinances" *not* the "essential ordinances" or "golden core"<sup>201</sup> which are relative. Because these "essential ordinances"<sup>202</sup> of religion are not relative, but "eternal; verities" seen from various perspectives by successive ages, we have earlier in this paper described this view as evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.

## 12. Conclusion

The Bahá'í Writings do not exemplify relativism as a philosophy but rather something superficially similar but actually quite different, namely, relationalism and an evolutionary Platonic perspectivism. Nowhere do the Writings align themselves with the various philosophical aspects of relativism, and therefore, to say they are relativistic misrepresents their philosophical nature both to Bahá'ís and not non-Bahá'ís. Such misunderstanding can make the work of teaching, explicating and defending the Faith even more difficult than it already is by creating needless obstacles.

Nor can relativism be employed as a solution to the problem of religious diversity. First of all, Bahá'ís have to remember that

Bahá'u'lláh does not include all religious phenomena in His definition of the religion of God ... Bahá'u'lláh has not taught that every school, every branch of the true religions of God are rightly guided and hence reflect truly reflect the intentions of their Founders.<sup>203</sup>

For example, Bahá'u'lláh says that some religions are "the outcome of human perversity."<sup>204</sup> This alone should prevent Bahá'ís from simply accepting at face value any and all religious claims; rather they should examine them critically to see if they accord with Bahá'u'lláh's divine teachings and reason, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá does in his discussions about Sufism, Theosophy<sup>205</sup>, Hinduism<sup>206</sup> (in regards to reincarnation), Catholicism (in regards to monks and the doctrine of transubstantiation<sup>207</sup>) and Buddhism.<sup>208</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussions show no sign of wanting to accept any and all ideas and developments in religious thought - and this alone

demonstrates that he does not express or conduct himself like a relativist. The Master loves people, but this does not prevent him from examining their ideas in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings<sup>209</sup> and critical reasoning. The teachings are the Archimedean point from which other religious claims must be evaluated:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.<sup>210</sup>

Relativism is also powerless to solve the problem of conflicting religious diversity because relativism has no answer to the conflicts except to let them continue since all viewpoints are true from their own standpoint. There is no possible way to resolve their differences on the basis of relativist philosophy because a relativist philosophy encourages the perpetuation of these differences and sees no need to bring them together. They are not seen as problematical in the first place. Why should it, if everyone is right? And on what basis could it do so? Choosing any such basis, would, in effect, be choosing a Archimedean standpoint from which to evaluate other beliefs – and that leads to all sorts of difficulties relativism seeks to avoid.

Here is yet another reason to conclude that the Bahá'í Writings do not exemplify a relativist philosophy. Rather, as we have seen, it illustrates an approach we have called relationalism and evolutionary Platonic perspectivism which do justice to the Faith's respect for diversity without sinking in the quicksand of relativism.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, p. 326; see also *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.27 and 32.

<sup>3</sup> "Tablet to Dr. Forel" in *Bahá'í World Faith*, 343; *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 4, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Relationalism is generally associated with the process philosophy of Whitehead and his successors. It is supported by the Writings, e.g.

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- Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.178 - 179; See also *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 160
- <sup>6</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 14; p.108.
- <sup>7</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXII, p.51.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, p.5.
- [www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/feyerabe.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/feyerabe.htm)
- <sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of this subject see Ian Kluge, "Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfan* 9, 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> Rorty
- <sup>11</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology*.
- <sup>12</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
- <sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*;
- <sup>14</sup> Foucault
- <sup>15</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*.
- <sup>16</sup> Lacan; Deleuze and Guattari
- <sup>17</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.58.
- <sup>18</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.115.
- <sup>19</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.. The identification of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism as pivotal concepts for studying relativism is based on this book.
- <sup>20</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.
- <sup>21</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4
- <sup>22</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.
- <sup>23</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.
- <sup>24</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.255-256.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, p. 340.
- <sup>26</sup> *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 795.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich, p.794.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, p. 885.
- <sup>29</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 30.
- <sup>30</sup> See Nelson Goodman in *Ways of World-Making* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978). Goodman, unconvincingly tries to dissociate himself from more radical consequences of his views.
- <sup>31</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*,
- <sup>32</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*.
- <sup>33</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.255-256.
- <sup>34</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*.
- <sup>35</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.
- <sup>36</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.
- <sup>37</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.
- <sup>38</sup> Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.

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- <sup>39</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, emphasis added.
- <sup>40</sup> David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Section 1, p. 278.
- <sup>41</sup> David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Section 1, p. 279.
- <sup>42</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Sect. VII, Part I, p.32.
- <sup>43</sup> *Varieties of Relativism*, p. 20.
- <sup>44</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 2, Section II, Subsection IV.
- <sup>45</sup> Stephen R.C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, p. 37.
- <sup>46</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 2.
- <sup>47</sup> Ammittai F. Aviram, "Asking the Question: Kant and Postmodernism?"
- <sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #493.
- <sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #534.
- <sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #537.
- <sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #555.
- <sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *Of Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*.
- <sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, I,1.
- <sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552.
- <sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552; emphasis added.
- <sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 480.
- <sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 481.
- <sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #616.
- <sup>59</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.
- <sup>60</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiii.
- <sup>61</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.34.
- <sup>62</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- <sup>63</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- <sup>64</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.31.
- <sup>65</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.
- <sup>66</sup> Best and Kellner, "The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Deficits"
- <sup>67</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.146.
- <sup>68</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p.86; italics added.
- <sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 24; italics added.
- <sup>70</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p. 95.
- <sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p. 127.
- <sup>72</sup> Derrida who is very inventive in coining new terms for his concepts and often has several terms for identical concepts.
- <sup>73</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.298; also p.281.
- <sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p.58.

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- <sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.
- <sup>76</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.
- <sup>77</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.
- <sup>78</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
- <sup>79</sup> Andrew Thacker, "Michel Foucault", *The Literary Encyclopedia*.
- <sup>80</sup> Scott H. More, "Christian History, Providence and Foucault", *Fides et Historia*, XXIX:1 (Winter/Spring 1997): 5-14
- <sup>81</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.10.
- <sup>82</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- <sup>83</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.23.
- <sup>84</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- <sup>85</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28; emphasis added.
- <sup>86</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28.
- <sup>87</sup> J.G Merquior, *Foucault*, p.50.
- <sup>88</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theories: Critical Interrogations*, p.41.
- <sup>89</sup> Michel Foucault, interview in *La Quinzaine Literature*, quoted in J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.36.
- <sup>90</sup> Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism : " in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.202.
- <sup>91</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity:" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.23.
- <sup>92</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity" in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.192.
- <sup>93</sup> Richard Rorty, "Science as Solidarity" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.44.
- <sup>94</sup> Richard Rorty, "Science as Solidarity" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.39.
- <sup>95</sup> Someone might claim such was the case in an alternative world, but that does not make it true in this world. There simply is no viewpoint from which such a claim is true for the world we live in.
- <sup>96</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 11:26.
- <sup>97</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation IV.
- <sup>98</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.278.
- <sup>99</sup> I do not intend to suggest Thomism is the last word in philosophy but its beginning with the concept of 'being' certainly puts it on solid philosophical ground.
- <sup>100</sup> Dr. Josef Mengele, the "Angel of Death" at Auschwitz, infamous for his experiments on live and often conscious human subjects as well as twins.
- <sup>101</sup> See also Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, for more.
- <sup>102</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.179.
- <sup>103</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 326 - 327.
- <sup>104</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 224.
- <sup>105</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 465.



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- <sup>106</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.7.
- <sup>107</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208
- <sup>108</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 60.
- <sup>109</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.184.
- <sup>110</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.184.
- <sup>111</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p.184.
- <sup>112</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come.*, p.2. See also *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.58, 111; *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 185.
- <sup>113</sup> PUP 154; emphasis added.
- <sup>114</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.59.
- <sup>115</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p.172.
- <sup>116</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p.108.
- <sup>117</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 213.
- <sup>118</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.
- <sup>119</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p.108.
- <sup>120</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXX, p. 136.
- <sup>121</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262.
- <sup>122</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 290.
- <sup>123</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.282.
- <sup>124</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 151 – 152.
- <sup>125</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 89.
- <sup>126</sup> The term is mainly associated with Whitehead's process philosophy and its later developments.
- <sup>127</sup> SAQ 178 – 179; See also SWAB 160
- <sup>128</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.179; emphasis added.
- <sup>129</sup> *Varieties of Relativism*, p.111. See Nelson Goodman's *Ways of World-Making* for example.
- <sup>130</sup> PUP 89; emphasis added.
- <sup>131</sup> PUP p. 88.
- <sup>132</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281; emphasis added.
- <sup>133</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.203.
- <sup>134</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.243.
- <sup>135</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.278; emphasis added.
- <sup>136</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.243.
- <sup>137</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.263 – 264.
- <sup>138</sup> 'Proper' here is meant more in its traditional sense of 'belonging to itself.'
- <sup>139</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.243.
- <sup>140</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 27-28.
- <sup>141</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 27-28.
- <sup>142</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 27-28
- <sup>143</sup> Terry's article "*The Oneness of Reality: A Response to Relativism*" focuses

- specifically on the religious/theological difficulties with Momen's thesis. [bs.ericwil.nl/modules.php?op=modload&name=UpDownload&file=index&req=detail&id=142](http://bs.ericwil.nl/modules.php?op=modload&name=UpDownload&file=index&req=detail&id=142).
- <sup>144</sup> Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics" Bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html . Posted with permission of author and publisher (Kalimat Press 1988.)
- <sup>145</sup> Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- <sup>146</sup> Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- <sup>147</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá , "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'" ; emphasis added.
- <sup>148</sup> A similar conclusion was reached by Keven Brown in " 'Abdu'l-Bahá 's Response to the Doctrine of the Unity of Existence" in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 11, Number 34, September-December 2001.
- <sup>149</sup> This, of course, raises the question as to why 'Abdu'l-Bahá would take such a neutral position and on this score we enter the realm of historical speculation. It is possible, for example, that he did not want to get the new faith or its adherents embroiled in a long-standing Islamic theological dispute especially while they were in Baghdad.
- <sup>150</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 18 - 19.
- <sup>151</sup> In fact, the Writings hold to a correspondence theory of truth. See Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" for detailed documentation about the correspondence theory of truth in the Writings. Published in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol.4, 2003.
- <sup>152</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 41.
- <sup>153</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 10.
- <sup>154</sup> SAQ 137. This rejection of a subjective theory of truth is illustrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's denial of the geocentric theory of the solar system. He says, "The eye sees the sun and planets revolving around the earth, whereas *in reality* the sun is stationary, central, and the earth revolves upon its own axis." "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- <sup>155</sup> *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic) #13, 7.
- <sup>156</sup> SWAB 108
- <sup>157</sup> *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 20 - 21.
- <sup>158</sup> *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 20.
- <sup>159</sup> Quoted in Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- <sup>160</sup> *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 36 - 37.
- <sup>161</sup> GWB LXXXIV, p.166; see also 187.
- <sup>162</sup> Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- <sup>163</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- <sup>164</sup> *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- <sup>165</sup> *Some Answered Questions* , p. 233.
- <sup>166</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XCIII, 188.
- <sup>167</sup> *Some Answered Questions* , p. 230.
- <sup>168</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá , "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'" ; emphasis added.

- <sup>169</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, of course, reveals a three-fold division of existence – the stations of Creator, Manifestation and the rest of creation. (*Some Answered Questions* 295.) However, unaided natural reason, can, by itself, only identify two stations, Creator and created. The station of Manifestation requires revelation by the Manifestations of God. Moreover, the first fundamental division is between Creator and created.
- <sup>170</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 195
- <sup>171</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 195
- <sup>172</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 221.
- <sup>173</sup> SVFV 23 (“The Valley of Unity”); emphasis added;
- <sup>174</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>175</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XCV, 192; emphasis added.
- <sup>177</sup> For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, SAQ 119; SDC 86.
- <sup>178</sup> “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*”
- <sup>179</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, p. 563.
- <sup>180</sup> It would, for example, make impossible William Hatcher’s project in *Minimalism: A Bridge between Classical Philosophy and the Baha’i Revelation*. Minimalism depends on the acceptance of certain basic principles as foundational to the Baha’i Faith.
- <sup>181</sup> “Verily I say, in this most mighty Revelation, all the Dispensations of the past have attained their highest, their final consummation.” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CLXI, p. 340.)
- <sup>182</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 100.
- <sup>183</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CVI, p.213.
- <sup>184</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.41.
- <sup>185</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CVI, p. 213.
- <sup>186</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XVI, p. 39 – 40.
- <sup>187</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXXIV, p. 81.
- <sup>188</sup> *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* 13.
- <sup>189</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 7.
- <sup>190</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XCIII, p.187.
- <sup>191</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XCIII, p. 186.
- <sup>192</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 173- 174.
- <sup>193</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CLX, p.336 – 337.
- <sup>194</sup> *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics* .
- <sup>195</sup> *Some Answered Questions* 5. Of course, it is important to distinguish the absolute assertion that God exists from particular descriptions of God; the latter may well be limited by our personal perspectives, but the former is an absolute truth.
- <sup>196</sup> *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*”
- <sup>197</sup> *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* p. 220.
- <sup>198</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* CIX, p.215; emphasis added.

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- <sup>199</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* p.58; see also the Preface to *The Promised Day is Come*; *Bahá'í Administration* p.185.
- <sup>200</sup> *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* p.106.
- <sup>201</sup> Alexander Skutch, *The Golden Core of Religion*.
- <sup>202</sup> *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* p.106.
- <sup>203</sup> Peter Terry, "The Oneness of Reality: A Response to Relativism."
- <sup>204</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CXI, p. 217.
- <sup>205</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.290.
- <sup>206</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 167.
- <sup>207</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 213.
- <sup>208</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 165.
- <sup>209</sup> People and their ideas are not the same things; an essential part of the art of consultation is learning how to distinguish the two and how to separate oneself from one's ideas.
- <sup>210</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p.56.

# Shoghi Effendi's *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*

## A Theology of the Word

Jack McLean

### The Epitome of His Writings

According to anecdotal reports, Shoghi Effendi Rabbaní (1897-1957), the former head and Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, considered the four-part treatise, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (1934), to be the *ne plus ultra* of his writings and his last Will and Testament.<sup>1</sup> The Guardian describes "...the scope and purpose..." of this document as "...an exposition of the fundamental verities of the Faith."<sup>2</sup> The exposition consists of four sections. Sections one to three define the "station" (*maqám*) of the Bahá'í Faith's "Three Central Figures."<sup>3</sup> Part four elucidates the "political"<sup>4</sup> aspects of Bahá'í governance and supplies the ideological basis for Bahá'u'lláh's new world order as an ideal type of theocracy. Shoghi Effendi wrote that part four should be considered as a "supplement" to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament.<sup>5</sup> This paper selectively analyses mainly the first three sections of the *Dispensation*.

While the word theology is nowhere used in the text, this work cannot be classified as anything other than a theological treatise. The expression "theology of the word" used in the title refers to: (1) Shoghi Effendi's interpretations of the ontological reality and station of the two Divine Manifestations or Prophets, the Báb (1819-1850), Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) and "the Mystery of God" (*Seirulláh*),<sup>6</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), the authorised interpreter of their teachings and "perfect Exemplar"<sup>7</sup> of the Bahá'í teachings. (2) Other interpretations of Bahá'í sacred scripture made by the Guardian in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*. While the expression "theology of the word" has its counterpart in Christian theology, and was used to designate a group of neo-orthodox (i.e. Christocentric) theologians who believed in the self-sufficiency of the Christian

revelation,<sup>8</sup> it is derived textually from the *Will and Testament* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which refers to Shoghi Effendi as follows: "He is the Interpreter (*mubáyyín*) of the Word of God."<sup>9</sup> This statement is repeated verbatim by Shoghi Effendi in the *Dispensation* when he explicates the functions of the Guardian: "He is the Interpreter of the Word of God."<sup>10</sup>

Nine themes have been selected: (1) the proactive role of the *Dispensation* in determining some of the fundamental tenets of Bahá'í theology. (2) the virtue of economy. (3) the creation of a new theological idiom. (4) the station of the Báb and the "proof" from history. (5) logical consequences and the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. (6) Shoghi Effendi's rejection of bad hermeneutics: the so-called "mystic unity" theory of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. (7) the balance of positive and negative theology. (8) exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist statements in the *Dispensation*. (9) Shoghi Effendi's apologetic method of comparison and the "new comparativism." Due to limitations of space, I have focused on the stations of the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and analyzed some of Shoghi Effendi's theological interpretations and method. Neither the station of Bahá'u'lláh, nor the theocratic basis of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh are explored here.

## Proactive Authoritative Theology

Writer, poet, mystic, scholar and Hand of the Cause of God, Horace Hotchkiss Holly (1887-1960), editor of the Guardian's world order letters, included the *Dispensation* in the eight letter collection published as *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (1938). However, the substance of parts one to three clearly belongs to theology (theologia, Gk.+ Lat.=discourse on the divine), rather to considerations of world order *per se*. Like his other writings, with the exception of the historical work *God Passes By* (1944), *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* is epistolary. However, the *Dispensation* is no ordinary letter. It has been aptly described by Madame Rúhiyyih Rabbaní as a "weighty treatise."<sup>11</sup> Although Madame Rabbaní's comments are understandably personal and favourable, they are nonetheless incisive. They indicate that the *Dispensation* created a quantum leap in the growing intellectual and spiritual understanding of the Bahá'í community regarding its most fundamental beliefs. Her remarks establish the priority that Shoghi Effendi gave to the *Dispensation vis-à-vis* the mass of his other writings:

The weighty treatise known as *The Dispensation of*

*Bahá'u'lláh*, written in 1934, burst upon the Bahá'ís like a blinding white light. I remember when I first read it I had the most extraordinary feeling as if the whole universe had suddenly expanded around me and I was looking out into a dazzling star-filled immensity; all the frontiers of our understanding flew outwards; the glory of this Cause and the true station of its Central Figures were revealed to us and we were never the same again. One would have thought that the stunning impact of this one communication from the Guardian would kill puniness of soul forever! However Shoghi Effendi felt in his inmost heart about his other writings, I know from his remarks that he considered he had said all he had to say, in many ways, in the *Dispensation*.<sup>12</sup>

Since the *Dispensation* explicates fundamental Bahá'í beliefs, a few remarks are in order on the relevance of "Bahá'í theology" as an academic discipline. While this phrase has gained acceptance among scholars over the past twenty years,<sup>13</sup> it was once viewed with suspicion among the rank and file and even some of the learned.<sup>14</sup> The negative, stereotypical view of theology is associated with priesthood, monolithic dogmatism and a divisive sectarianism. At worst, the record of *odium theologicum* shows an ancient history of bloody wars. To cite but one example, during the schism of the learned priest Arius of Alexandria, early in the fourth century CE, when the Arian bishop, Macedonius, was returned to office in Constantinople, over three thousand people lost their lives in the fighting. More Christians were slain by fellow Christians in this one contest alone than had died during the last terrible persecution of the Roman emperor Diocletian in 311 CE. ('Abdu'l-Bahá condemned the schism of Arius in a letter to Roy Wilhelm).<sup>15</sup>

Theology's logocentrism,<sup>16</sup> as articulated in the opening verse of the fourth Gospel—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)-- gave theology an absolute didactic character that has been historically misused in a political will-to-power. However, despite theology's troubled history, it is nonsensical to imagine that a world religion, as doctrinally sophisticated as the Bahá'í Faith, can define itself, and engage in interreligious dialogue, without benefit of theological analysis. *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* ensures the place of theology on the Bahá'í curriculum, whatever the nomenclature that will ultimately be used to describe the systematic approach to the knowledge of God or the form it will take.

Mathematician and philosopher of religion and science, William S. Hatcher (1935-2005), in "An Analysis of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*" makes this helpful observation: "Rarely, if ever, have subtle and vexatious theological questions been settled at an early stage in the history of a revealed religion."<sup>17</sup> Hatcher's reflection merits a categorical assertion: vexatious theological questions were never previously solved at an early stage in the history of a revealed religion. The issue that Shoghi Effendi clarifies throughout the first three parts of this work, namely, the stations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is, *mutatis mutandis*, the very question that bedevilled Christian theologians in the primitive church and fractured Christian structural and doctrinal unity for all time. The creeds that ultimately defined the Christ-nature

...underwent a long historical development that was not uncontested. They were finally elaborated in their present form after four centuries of acrimonious theological quarrelling that necessitated four [seven for the orthodox church] world councils of the church --those of Nicaea, Ephesus, Constantinople and Chalcedon--that brought in their wake bloody warfare among Christian factions. These christological controversies resulted in the fragmentation of the churches of Asia Minor from those of Greek Orthodox Constantinople, a fragmentation that has continued to this day.<sup>18</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá has alluded to the "...the complex matters of religious doctrine."<sup>19</sup> While the details of the christological controversies are not pertinent to this paper, nevertheless, an object lesson may be learned from this divisive period of early church history. Because of its close links to metaphysics, theology can prove to be speculative and abstruse. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for example, refers to questions dealing with the origin of the universe as having no beginning and free will and determinism as being respectively "one of the most abstruse spiritual truths" and "one of the most important and abstruse of divine problems,"<sup>20</sup> although Shoghi Effendi was averse to speculation, and according to one observer, "loathes abstractions."<sup>21</sup> The Universal House of Justice has referred to the past abuses and errors of theology in an observation that cautions against the intellectual pride that would attempt to define where definition was not advisable:

In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of



their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary.<sup>22</sup>

The *Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* has played a proactive role, whose significance cannot be overestimated, in vastly reducing any potential differences that could have otherwise arisen among Bahá'í scholars attempting to understand the subtle and complex questions surrounding the station and the ontological nature of the Bahá'í Faith's Three Central Figures.

## The Virtue of Economy: "Less is More"

A casual reading of the *Dispensation* misleads by its deceptive simplicity. Readers of academic theology are accustomed to dense text, copious references and complex arguments. Contemporary systematic theology, moreover, has generally abandoned exegesis and its scriptural roots, a separation that the distinguished theologian Hans Küng has called a "misery,"<sup>23</sup> whereas the *Dispensation* is noticeably text-rooted. The neat saying, attributed variously to the poet Robert Browning, the American architect Philip Johnson and the famous German minimalist architect, Mies van der Rohe, is an apt descriptor of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*—"Less is more."<sup>24</sup> The Guardian's economical exposition maximises the meaning with a minimum of words. William Hatcher has correctly observed:

Thus, at least as first glance, the structure of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* appears to be extremely simple and straightforward. However, this initial impression is quickly dispelled by the power and density of Shoghi Effendi's writing, by the number and complexity of the themes treated in the course of the exposition, by the abundant citations from both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í sources, and finally the frequent and sometimes subtle literary and historical allusions.<sup>25</sup>

Just as in physics a plenum is space filled with matter, Shoghi Effendi's theological doctrines, while they authoritatively define fundamentals, leave space for further reflection.

## The Creation of a Distinct Theological Idiom

The Guardian's theological vision is expressed in a distinct

theological idiom. Such phrases, for example, as the “Three Central Figures,” “the fundamental verities,” “station,” “the New World Order,” “Covenant,” “Center of the Covenant,” “Administrative Order” and “dispensation” have all contributed to form a common Bahá’í vocabulary. However, all these terms may be developed as technical theology. One of the major contributions of Shoghi Effendi’s writings is to have created a discrete and original discourse that reflects the Bahá’í belief and value system, i.e. a *Weltanschauung* without which no independent world religion can adequately function or be recognized. The accents of Shoghi Effendi’s voice are, moreover, clearly discernible in the various messages of the Universal House of Justice written since its first election on April 21, 1963. The historical retrospective, *Century of Light* (2001), written under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice, builds upon the historical observations and moral judgements of the Guardian.

## The Station of the Báb and the Proof From History

In his discussion of the “twofold station” of the Báb, that of “divinely-appointed Forerunner” and “the inaugurator of a separate religious Dispensation,”<sup>26</sup> Shoghi Effendi presents something that he calls “evidence,” evidence that is based on the remarkable historical events that took place during the nine year dispensation of the Báb (1844-1853), which witnessed the brutal repression of the Bábí community and which culminated in the Báb’s martyrdom on July 9, 1850. In a novel argument, Shoghi Effendi presents this transformative history as a proof of the Báb’s prophethood. In context, the Guardian’s word “evidence” should be taken as an intuitive rather than a scientific proof; it falls under the rubric of what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called “spiritual proofs.”<sup>27</sup> This evidence calls upon the reader’s ability to perceive a large ensemble of remarkable historical events as being generated by the Báb’s prophetic powers:

The marvelous happenings that have heralded the advent of the Founder of the Bábí Dispensation, the dramatic circumstances of His own eventful life, the miraculous tragedy of His martyrdom, the magic of His influence exerted on the most eminent and powerful among His countrymen, to all of which every chapter of Nabíl’s stirring narrative testifies, should in themselves be regarded as sufficient evidence of the validity of His claim to so exalted a station among the Prophets.<sup>28</sup>

Shoghi Effendi's affirmation is matter-of-fact. It is accompanied by that apocalyptic certitude that generally characterizes his doctrinal statements. Although the above passage alludes to the magical and the miraculous, it refers nonetheless to the properly historical events of a major episode in the history of the Qájár dynasty. The Guardian's view, which is based largely on Nabíl, parallels a passage from Bahá'u'lláh which also contains a "proof" from history, this one praising the Báb's companions:

If these companions, with all their marvellous testimonies and wondrous works, be false, who then is worthy to claim for himself the truth? I swear by God! Their very deeds are a sufficient testimony, and an irrefutable proof unto all the peoples of the earth, were men to ponder in their hearts the mysteries of divine Revelation."<sup>29</sup>

The Guardian's statement that the Báb's prophethood is proven by the transformative events of the history He generated is remarkable, both for what it says and does not say. It does not, for example, refer directly to the Báb's writings or to the manner in which the Báb proved Himself to be the promised Qá'im by fulfilling certain conditions or prophecies, although this point would be included within the history to which the Guardian alludes. Instead, Shoghi Effendi calls upon an entire sacred history as evidence, a dramatic pattern of events, whose first word was written by the Báb momentous declaration before an ecclesiastical court: "I am, I am, I am the Promised One."<sup>30</sup>

The sacred history to which the Guardian alludes as "evidence of the validity of His claim to so exalted a station among the Prophets" is one in which historical transformation is inextricably linked to personal transformation. In Shoghi Effendi's view, *Heilsgeschichte* is not just a sequence of events to be reified in "objective" fashion by the historian. Babí-Bahá'í history has been written, to put Winston Churchill's celebrated words to a different use, with the "...blood, toil, tears and sweat"<sup>31</sup> of a generation of Muslim heretics who had recognized the *Sáhibuz-Zamán* (Lord of the Age). This history never could have been written had not the Báb radically transformed the lives of those saints, scholars, teachers, heroes and martyrs with whom He came into direct contact.

## Logical Consequences and the Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The *Dispensation* is the definitive reference point for anyone who seeks to better understand the mysterious being who is the "Center of the Covenant" (*markaz-i-missagh*).<sup>32</sup> Part three of the *Dispensation* corrects some major misconceptions about the station and being of Bahá'u'lláh's eldest Son held by some western Bahá'is in the opening three decades of the twentieth century. Shoghi Effendi's method of correcting these misunderstandings is collaterally instructive. In laying down his theological definitions, Shoghi Effendi uses a simple but trenchant logic. Such phrases as "unwarranted inference," "erroneous conception," "altogether unjustified inference" and "the inescapable inference" indicate that deductive logic is at work, an inference in which a conclusion follows necessarily from one or more given premises (Lat. *deductio*= a leading down).<sup>33</sup>

The main thrust of Shoghi Effendi's argument is stated negatively, namely, "That 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not a Manifestation of God..." To believe the contrary is an "...unwarranted inference..." which he emphatically rejects. Two scriptural statements substantiate the Guardian's rejection of the error that once misconceived 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a prophet: (1) In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh warns that no prophet shall appear "...ere the expiration of a full thousand years..."<sup>34</sup> This statement categorically excludes 'Abdu'l-Bahá from prophethood. (2) 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own statements confirm that His essential station is that of servant of Bahá. In a dramatically conclusive reply, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provided the most comprehensive statement on His own self-understanding:

You have written that there is a difference among the believers concerning the 'Second Coming of Christ.' Gracious God! Time and again this question hath arisen, and its answer hath emanated in a clear and irrefutable statement from the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that what is meant in the prophecies by the 'Lord of Hosts' and the 'Promised Christ' is the Blessed Perfection (Bahá'u'lláh) and His holiness the Exalted One (the Báb). My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 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>35</sup>

By disabusing the Bahá'ís of his time of any lingering misconception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophethood, Shoghi Effendi makes the reader indirectly aware of the generative process inherent to deductive logic. While logic is an effective tool in verifying the true, and eliminating the false, its conclusions are only as valid as its premises. A false premise can create, moreover, a deleterious nexus of beliefs that is not only theologically incorrect but, more importantly, carries "real life" adverse consequences. (This is particularly true in the consequential world of religion). Shoghi Effendi draws the reader's attention to this very point regarding the erroneous belief that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a Manifestation of God:

Indeed, as I have already stated, those who overestimate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station are just as reprehensible and have done just as much harm as those who underestimate it. And this for no other reason except that by insisting upon an altogether unwarranted inference from Bahá'u'lláh's writings they are inadvertently justifying and continuously furnishing the enemy with proofs for his false accusations and misleading statements.<sup>36</sup>

While there is much evidence to suggest that the covenant-breakers<sup>37</sup> ("the enemy") in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's immediate family were driven by the basest of motives, the western believers who overestimated 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station unknowingly fuelled the persecution inflicted on 'Abdu'l-Bahá by members of His family. These covenant-breakers could point to these western believers to prove their allegation that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was claiming prophethood.

However, this was only one of two evils. Shoghi Effendi is also referring to the accusation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's half-brother, "the arch-breaker of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh,"<sup>38</sup> Muhammad-'Alí and his associates, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had claimed Divinity. In his so-called "epistle of repentance," Bahá'u'lláh's youngest son, Badí'u'lláh (d. 1950), described the offences committed by Muhammad-'Alí. These included the interpolation of Bahá'u'lláh's sacred writings to belittle the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to exalt Muhammad-'Alí's.<sup>39</sup> Like the doubting apostle, St. Thomas (John 20:26-29), the youngest son was a wavering Badí'u'lláh. His brief moment of repentance was soon followed by a relapse of rebellion. (But unlike Badí'u'lláh, the sceptical Thomas, according to Christian tradition, became steadfast and died a martyr's death).<sup>40</sup>

Badí'u'lláh confessed in his letter that among these "false

accusations” was Muhammad-‘Alí’s allegation that “...the Master claims to be the embodiment of Divinity...”<sup>41</sup> This falsehood was circulated despite ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s repeated and explicit written denials of such a preposterous claim. In a tablet that stigmatizes his younger brother as “the Centre of Sedition,” and outlines some of his odious deeds, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to Muhammad-‘Alí’s accusations: “Another day he would raise an uproar, saying that the oneness of God had been denied, since another Manifestation had been proclaimed, prior to the expiration of a thousand years.”<sup>42</sup>

Shoghi Effendi makes three other important deductions that necessarily follow from his statement that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not a Manifestation of God. First, the Guardian corrects the false impression that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá enjoys a so-called “mystic unity” with Bahá'u'lláh. (Further to this point, see the next section). Second, the notion that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is a prophet would have had the following consequence:

It would also amount to a reversion to those irrational and superstitious beliefs which have insensibly crept, in the first century of the Christian era, into the teachings of Jesus Christ, and by crystallizing into accepted dogmas have impaired the effectiveness and obscured the purpose of the Christian Faith.<sup>43</sup>

What the Guardian seems to have in mind here is the dogma of the trinity, which was itself subject to a historical process--this may explain the reference to “dogmas”-- with its divinization of the Son who was elevated to the Godhead. Third, to maintain such a belief would result in an unconscionable, strange reversal. It would lower the station of the Báb:

Furthermore, the inescapable inference from the belief in the identity of the Author of our Faith with Him Who is the Center of His Covenant would be to place ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a position superior to that of the Báb, the reverse of which is the fundamental, though not as yet universally recognized, principle of this Revelation.<sup>44</sup>

It is noteworthy that Shoghi Effendi points out that this principle was “...not as yet universally recognized...” The Guardian’s statement testifies to the great sway that “...the vibrant, the magnetic personality of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá...” with its “...glory and power with which They who are the Manifestations of God are alone endowed”<sup>45</sup> still held over the hearts and minds of early North American Bahá'ís. Simply put, the Bahá'ís

generally ascribed a greater station to 'Abdu'l-Bahá than they did to the Báb.

## Rejection of Bad Hermeneutics: The “Mystic Unity” Theory

Another false notion that followed from 'Abdu'l-Bahá supposed prophethood was the so-called “mystic unity”<sup>46</sup> between Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This belief was in part based on the wrong inference drawn from a hadith quoted in the *Kitáb-i-Şqán*: “I am He, Himself, and He is I, myself.”<sup>47</sup> The phrase was truncated into English as “He is Myself” and taken out of context. According to the maxim in biblical and literary hermeneutics, “A text without a context is a pretext.”<sup>48</sup> The mystic unity theory is a reminder that holy scripture must be interpreted in context to avoid an exegetical fallacy. Shoghi Effendi wrote the following clarification:

I feel it necessary, therefore, to state without any equivocation or hesitation that neither in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* nor in the Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, nor even in the Tablet of the Branch, nor in any other Tablet, whether revealed by Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is there any authority whatever for the opinion that inclines to uphold the so-called “mystic unity” of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or to establish the identity of the latter with His Father or with any preceding Manifestation...Moreover, to maintain that the assertion “He is Myself,” instead of denoting the mystic unity of God and His Manifestations, as explained in the *Kitáb-i-Şqán*, establishes the identity of Bahá'u'lláh with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, would constitute a direct violation of the oft-repeated principle of the oneness of God's Manifestations -- a principle which the Author of these same extracts is seeking by implication to emphasize.<sup>49</sup>

This statement makes it clear that the principle of mystic unity *does* legitimately apply to the relationship between God and His Manifestation or to the Manifestations with one another. The unity of the Divine Manifestations or Prophets with God, as contained in the phrase “He is Myself,” which is one of the teachings of the *Kitáb-i-Şqán*,<sup>50</sup> was misappropriated and applied to the relationship between Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Taking a statement out of context, i.e. from one context that conveys one or more of its legitimate meanings and applying it

in another, which distorts the meaning, can be evidence of one or more of the following: (1) an esoteric mind-set that strains to make a point (2) a fundamentalist mind-set that fails to make necessary distinctions where they are warranted (3) forcing an argument (4) a tendency to round-off in a non-discriminating levelling process that is liable to occur when a comprehensive concept such as “unity” is at issue.

Thornton Chase's letter to Wellesley Tudor-Pole, quoted below, substantiates point (1). It informs us that in the opening years of the twentieth century, some Bahá'ís selected scriptural code-words that they applied esoterically. However, it is understandable that Bahá'ís of Christian background would be liable to such a misconception given the magnitude of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's magnetic, divine charisma. Father-Son phraseology was for centuries, and still is, basic to Christian theology. It was an easy and natural transfer to apply the Father-Son relationship of God and Christ to Bahá'u'lláh (the Father), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the Son). Shoghi Effendi's correction and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explicit denials make it clear that the “Christian Bahá'ís” regarded 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a Christ figure: “that He is not to be acclaimed as the return of Jesus Christ, the Son Who will come “in the glory of the Father”—.”<sup>51</sup>

Thornton Chase, however, was not so confused. Dr. Robert Stockman's archival research shows that the man designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as “the first Bahá'í in America,”<sup>52</sup> complained frequently in his letters that the Bahá'ís misunderstood 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station. In a letter to Wellesley Tudor-Pole (December 1, 1911) that does not conceal his disappointment, Chase wrote:

Many of those who have named themselves Bahá'ís are of an enthusiastic and emotional nature which seeks a living object upon which to lavish the wealth of their hopes. They seek out single phrases and words, occurring in various Tablets from Abdul-Bahá, give to them their own interpretations, and then set them up as a sort of authority contrary to the evident strong and oft repeated declarations of Abdul-Bahá himself regarding his mission and station. As though that which he emphasizes were not sufficiently great, they strive to consider and proclaim him to be the Christ, the Word Incarnate, the Savior, etc., and they bitterly antagonize those who look upon Baha'o'llah as the fulfiller and completer of these Offices.<sup>53</sup>

To his credit, Chase understood and upheld the distinction between the stations of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá at a time



when many American Bahá'ís were simply too awed to understand 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station according to His own self-understanding. Stockman points out that the question of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station was "completely confusing to the American Christian mind. He did not fit into any category."<sup>54</sup> The subtleties involved in discerning how "...the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized"<sup>55</sup> were too complex for many who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá to see Him in any other light than that of a prophet.

Echoes of the old misunderstanding surfaced during my interview with prolific writer, teacher and personality, Stanwood Cobb (1881-1982), at his home at the Green Acre Bahá'í School near Eliot, Maine in the summer of 1977. Mr. Cobb who was then 96 years old, shared his impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá whom he had met on five different occasions: Akká (1909, 1910), Boston and Washington (1912) and Paris (1913). When I asked about his view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in light of the passing years, the tension between orthodoxy and personal impression was clearly felt. With sudden emotion, Mr. Cobb said: "Well, if I told you what I really thought you would find it reprehensible." When I asked for a clarification, he replied: "If 'Abdu'l-Bahá had not specifically denied being a prophet, as far as I was concerned, He was. He moved with the ease of a king. He was as free as a bird and did just as he pleased." Mr. Cobb's anecdotes included such remarks as "If he wanted to visit a home in town, He just knocked on the door and walked in."<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Thornton Chase, other Bahá'ís, like the naturopath Dr. Edward Getsinger, failed to be convinced, even by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's fervent denials. Although Getsinger spent over six months in Akká in 1899, 1900 and 1901, still he clung to his own opinion. One of his letters indicated that Getsinger thought he knew better than 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For Dr. Getsinger, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's claim of pure servitude was a mere veil of humility that could not conceal His true reality--at least as the doctor divined it. In May, 1903 he wrote the Bahá'ís of North Hudson, New Jersey, making this dogmatic pronouncement: "We should never cease to impress all that the Master is whom we believe He is--The Christ of this generation to the Gentiles, and not what He in His humility chooses to claim for Himself--a servant."<sup>57</sup> Getsinger's argument was so convincing that the North Hudson Board of Council "heartily endorsed" and recorded the doctor's opinion in its minutes!<sup>58</sup> It was, consequently, with good reason that Shoghi Effendi found it

imperative to clarify the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Ali Kuli Khan, who had spent fourteen months between 1900-1901 in Akká working as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's translator, saw the conundrum. If Bahá'u'lláh is Christ, who then is the majestic personage called 'Abdu'l-Bahá? Upon his arrival in America in 1901, he wrote: "If you want to say that all our Christian world have been waiting the Appearance of [the] Father & Christ, & that if you tell them Beha was Christ then you will have difficulty in proving to them Abdul-Beha--this is a question which you will have to write for the Master, and then He will direct you how to teach this point."<sup>59</sup>

Another factor may account for the mystic unity theory. This has to do with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's function as "Interpreter of the Word of God."<sup>60</sup> It *seems* plausible to assume that the one who was capable of interpreting infallibly the writings of Bahá'u'lláh must "know" the mind of Bahá'u'lláh and be "unified" with it. But Shoghi Effendi has made a distinction that rejects such an idea. Although the Guardian's comment applies to his own function as interpreter, his point may be applied by analogy to Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

The fact that the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not necessarily confer upon him a station co-equal with those Whose words he is called upon to interpret. He can exercise that right and discharge this obligation and yet remain infinitely inferior to both of them in rank and different in nature.<sup>61</sup>

This quotation requires qualification. Interpretation notwithstanding, the Guardian made it clear that the gulf that separates him from 'Abdu'l-Bahá is much wider than the one that separates 'Abdu'l-Bahá from Bahá'u'lláh:

To degrade His lofty rank by identifying His station with or by regarding it as roughly equivalent to, the position of those on whom the mantle of His authority has fallen would be an act of impiety as grave as the no less heretical belief that inclines to exalt Him to a state of absolute equality with either the central Figure or Forerunner of our Faith. For wide as is the gulf that separates 'Abdu'l-Bahá from Him Who is the Source of an independent Revelation, it can never be regarded as commensurate with the greater distance that stands between Him Who is the

Center of the Covenant and His ministers who are to carry on His work, whatever be their name, their rank, their functions or their future achievements.<sup>62</sup>

## The Balance of Positive and Negative Theology

One feature of the deep structure of Shoghi Effendi's thought reveals that his interpretations are formulated by the balance of positive (affirmative) and negative (contrary) statements. This process may be viewed as a "dialectic" which I define simply as a laying down of first principles or fundamental truths. (I am not suggesting here that Shoghi Effendi consciously followed a philosophic dialectic in making his interpretations but rather that when examined they reveal this structure). Due to limitations of space, only two examples of this construction will be provided. Six other brief examples are found at the end of this section.

The "negative theology" that I attribute to Shoghi Effendi is quite different from the apophatic or negative theology in the Abrahamic religions, the *theologica apophatika* that maintains the strictest silence about the essence of divinity.<sup>63</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá encapsulates the essence of negative theology when he says: "We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections."<sup>64</sup> Rather, Shoghi Effendi's use of the balance of positive (X is this) and negative theology (X is not this) both affirms and denies a thing in order to define its true nature. In defining the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is no mediating middle other than the category of mystery itself. This lack of a middle position is typical of some, although by no means all, his theological judgements which are generally categorical. Here is just one example that rejects divine incarnation (Ar. =*hullul*), pantheism and anthropomorphism:

So crude and fantastic a theory of Divine incarnation is as removed from, and incompatible with, the essentials of Bahá'í belief as are the no less inadmissible pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of God--both of which the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh emphatically repudiate and the fallacy of which they expose.<sup>65</sup>

However, we should not conclude from this one statement alone that broad, liberal or inclusivist doctrines are not found in Shoghi Effendi's interpretations. (This question is explored below in "Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist Statements in the

*Dispensation*").

### **Example One: The Summary Statement of the Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá**

Shoghi Effendi's summary statement of the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá interweaves both affirmations and negations. By artificially inserting [+] and [-] signs into the text, it becomes apparent that Shoghi Effendi has juxtaposed and balanced positive and negative elements in the formulation of his interpretation. Overall, they contain four negative and three positive elements. His statement is concise but packed with meaning:

[1][-]That 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not a Manifestation of God, [+] that He gets His light, His inspiration and sustenance direct from the Fountain-head of the Bahá'í Revelation; [2][+] that He reflects even as a clear and perfect Mirror the rays of Bahá'u'lláh's glory, [-] and does not inherently possess that indefinable yet all-pervading reality the exclusive possession of which is the hallmark of Prophethood; [3] [-]that His words are not equal in rank, [+] though they possess an equal validity with the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh; [4][-] that He is not to be acclaimed as the return of Jesus Christ, the Son Who will come "in the glory of the Father"--.<sup>66</sup>

His interpretation is followed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's self-interpretation which has been quoted above but which bears repeating:

*My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 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>67</sup>

With his [positive + negative polarization], [statement + qualification], [statement + caution] construction, Shoghi Effendi considers both ends of the theological spectrum. He eliminates those excesses, either positive or negative, which produce errors. In the following statement, for example, Shoghi Effendi cautions the reader against a reduction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's pure servitude or His being a mere interpreter of His father's words:

From such clear and formally laid down statements, incompatible as they are with any assertion of a claim to Prophethood, we should not by any means infer that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is merely one of the servants of the Blessed Beauty, or at best one whose function is to be confined to that of an authorized interpreter of His Father's teachings. Far be it from me to entertain such a notion or to wish to instill such sentiments.<sup>68</sup>

By clearly defining end limits, Shoghi Effendi gives full weight and balance to the teachings he interprets. In this balance, he excludes both an overly exalted and demeaning view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The same holds true for his analysis of the station of Bahá'u'lláh.

### **Example Two: Positive Bahá'í Spirituality and its Negative Counterpart in Contemporary Society**

The second example is taken from the portrait of Bahá'í community spirituality. The Guardian's illustration is found in part four which delineates the basic features of the Administrative Order. By including things spiritual in a treatment of things administrative, Shoghi Effendi seems to be following Bahá'u'lláh's method in the *Aqdas* which mixes normally disparate categories, such as legal formulations and ritual law, with the mystical language of love, beauty and refinement. As for the *Aqdas*, this blending of administrative and spiritual themes in the *Dispensation* notifies the reader that there can be no separation of spiritual from administrative principles, a point that Shoghi Effendi has made explicitly elsewhere:

To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.<sup>69</sup>

### **The Positive Pole**

In the final section of the *Dispensation*, Shoghi Effendi compares and contrasts "...the process of slow and steady consolidation that characterizes the growth of its [the Bahá'í Faith's] infant strength and the devastating onrush of the forces of disintegration that are assailing the outworn institutions, both religious and secular, of present-day society!" with the

outstanding spirituality of the Bahá'í Faith's "administrators," "itinerant teachers" and others. This technique of comparison and contrast also constitutes a literary device which is the counterpart to the formulation of positive and negative theology:

The vitality which the organic institutions of this great, this ever-expanding Order so strongly exhibit; the obstacles which the high courage, the undaunted resolution of its administrators have already surmounted; the fire of an unquenchable enthusiasm that glows with undiminished fervor in the hearts of its itinerant teachers; the heights of self-sacrifice which its champion-builders are now attaining; the breadth of vision, the confident hope, the creative joy, the inward peace, the uncompromising integrity, the exemplary discipline, the unyielding unity and solidarity which its stalwart defenders manifest; the degree to which its moving Spirit has shown itself capable of assimilating the diversified elements within its pale, of cleansing them of all forms of prejudice and of fusing them with its own structure--these are evidences of a power which a disillusioned and sadly shaken society can ill afford to ignore.<sup>70</sup>

It will be readily seen from this contrast that the confident and vibrant spirituality exemplified by the Bahá'í community corresponds to the positive pole of Shoghi Effendi's analysis. The spiritual attributes that he lists above may be reduced to the following substantives: courage, resolution, enthusiasm, fervor, self-sacrifice, vision, hope, joy, integrity, discipline, unity and solidarity and freedom from prejudice.

### **The Negative Pole**

The Guardian then juxtaposes the positive spirituality shown by the Bahá'í community to the negative character traits displayed by the disillusioned and desperate citizens of a moribund world order:

Compare these splendid manifestations of the spirit animating this vibrant body of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh with the cries and agony, the follies and vanities, the bitterness and prejudices, the wickedness and divisions of an ailing and chaotic world. Witness the fear that torments its leaders and paralyzes the action of its blind and bewildered statesmen. How fierce the hatreds, how false the ambitions, how petty the pursuits, how

deep-rooted the suspicions of its peoples! How disquieting the lawlessness, the corruption, the unbelief that are eating into the vitals of a tottering civilization!<sup>71</sup>

To make this construction of the balance of positive and negative poles more explicit, two sets of contrasting spiritual attributes from the above passages are juxtaposed here:

high courage/cries and agony,  
 the exemplary discipline/the follies and vanities,  
 the unyielding unity and solidarity/ the wickedness and divisions of an ailing and chaotic world  
 the uncompromising integrity/the lawlessness, the corruption, the unbelief  
 the inward peace/the fear that torments its leaders  
 the heights of self-sacrifice/how petty the pursuits  
 undiminished fervor/the bitterness and prejudices

One should not conclude from this example that the Guardian is making unfair comparisons or is indulging in condemnation for condemnation's sake. He views the spiritual vitality of the Bahá'í community, and the deplorable moral condition of the modern world, as a necessary consequence of the transformative power of Bahá'u'lláh for those who have accepted Him, and the inevitable result for those who have rejected Him. His judgment, however, comes to a note of wisdom: he views the present state of the world as an unavoidable and necessary stage that will lead eventually to the establishment of world unity and peace:

Might not this process of steady deterioration which is insidiously invading so many departments of human activity and thought be regarded as a necessary accompaniment to the rise of this almighty Arm of Bahá'u'lláh? [the Administrative Order] Might we not look upon the momentous happenings which, in the course of the past twenty years, have so deeply agitated every continent of the earth, as ominous signs simultaneously proclaiming the agonies of a disintegrating civilization and the birth pangs of that World Order--that Ark of human salvation--that must needs arise upon its ruins?<sup>72</sup>

Other examples of this positive-negative balanced construction are found, not only throughout the *Dispensation*,

but the entire corpus of Shoghi Effendi's writings. Here are six examples from our text that for brevity's sake I will simply state without further explication:

1. That Bahá'u'lláh is the supreme Manifestation of God but He is not God.<sup>73</sup>
2. That the Bahá'í Faith is the fulfilment of the world religions but is not superior to them.
3. That the Bahá'í universal cycle which began in 1844, despite the promise of its 500,000 year duration, is not the final revelation from God.
4. That the Báb is a self-sufficient Manifestation of God, not merely an inspired precursor of Bahá'u'lláh.
5. That the Guardian is the permanent head of the Universal House of Justice but cannot legislate, except as an individual member of that body.
6. That the exalted position of the Guardian does not make him a co-sharer in the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

### **Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist Statements in the *Dispensation***

Given the fundamental beliefs in Bahá'u'lláh as "the promise of all ages" and the Bahá'í dispensation as the culmination of a 6,000 year prophetic cycle,<sup>74</sup> on the one hand, and progressive revelation, the oneness of the prophets and the organic unity of the world's religions, on the other hand, how does Shoghi Effendi's theology fit with the influential tripartite interreligious typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism developed by Allan Race, John Hick, Gavin D'Costa, Dianna Eck, Paul Griffiths and others? This question was explored in papers by Dr. Seena Fazel and Dann J. May in 1997, and more recently by Grant Martin (2007), although these scholars have come to different conclusions.<sup>75</sup> Fazel argued that the Bahá'í Faith is pluralist, while Dann J. May has argued for a relativist "dynamic perspectivism," and cautioned against oversimplifying Bahá'í inclusivism.<sup>76</sup> Grant Martin, doctoral candidate in religious studies at McGill University (2008), has argued that the Bahá'í Faith is exclusivist as much as it is inclusivist.<sup>77</sup>

It is important to note at the outset that the use of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism by Christian theologians and philosophers of religion is not univocal, nor is it univocal



as used by Bahá'í scholars Fazel, May and Martin. John Hick's reported definition of Christian inclusivism as either the Roman Catholic belief that Christ's atonement redeems all of humanity even though individuals may be unaware of him or that the incarnate Christ, the universal divine Logos, accomplishes the work of salvation in and through other salvific figures,<sup>78</sup> does not equate with Bahá'í inclusivism based on the oneness of the world's religions and progressive revelation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the Bahá'í Faith as "... an inclusive movement; the teachings of all religions and societies are found here...The Bahá'í message is a call to religious unity..."<sup>79</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá would seem to be pointing to some common essence of religion or *philosophia perennis*, a phrase coined by Leibniz.

In the section above, I have argued that a deep structure is latent in Shoghi Effendi's theology which formulates his interpretations by juxtaposing and balancing positive and negative propositions. The positive pole tends to be "dogmatic" or exclusive, i.e. it affirms a theological truth based on strong divine authority which defies contradiction. This authoritative statement leaves space, nonetheless, for further interpretations and correlations to be made with other points of Bahá'í belief and/or the teachings of the other world's religions. This structural polarity, it is important to note, should not be perceived as reductive, black and white thinking or a closed fundamentalism without distinctions. As we shall see, Shoghi Effendi's theology includes not only dogmatic or exclusivist, but also inclusivist and pluralist statements.

Historically, the definition of religious doctrine tends to be exclusivist because it generally follows this formula: statement X is the predicate of Y but excludes Z. This exclusivism has occurred, of course, in the development of all orthodox theologies within the Abrahamic religions in their contests with heterodox theologies. Jewish and Islamic monotheism, for example, would rigidly exclude Christian trinitarianism, although 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounded a more inclusivist interpretation of the trinity.<sup>80</sup> The renowned twentieth century essentialist-existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) viewed the development of Christian dogma, for example, as a "continuing narrowing down," a process that was necessary to the very identity of the Christian church. Tillich commented on this narrowing down within historical Christianity from the early days of its orthodox struggles with Gnosticism and what it viewed later as other heresies:

The whole history of Christian dogma is a continuing

narrowing down, but at the same time a *defining*. And the definition is important, because without it many elements would have undercut the whole church, would have denied its existence. The dogma, therefore, the dogmatic development, is not something merely lamentable or evil. It was the necessary form by which the church kept its very identity...<sup>81</sup>

This phenomenon is no less true of Shoghi Effendi's interpretations in the *Dispensation*. If Tillich's idea is transposed, *mutatis mutandis*, to the theological interpretations made by the Guardian, we realise that *grosso modo* a similar process is taking place. By excluding, Shoghi Effendi is defining and thereby creating a distinct Bahá'í theology. However, he is not just applying a scalpel to eliminate the excess tissue of erroneous beliefs. Although he subtracts (the negative pole), he also adds (the positive pole). For example, although the Guardian denied the credibility of the "mystic unity" theory between Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he advocated instead the more positive "mystic intercourse" between Father and Son, a phrase that is found among a cluster of generative images that Shoghi Effendi used in the *Dispensation* to expound the mystical origins of the *Will and Testament*, images that recall, in some of their features, the birth narratives of the infant Jesus and a Christian mysticism of the divine marriage. Birthing imagery is present, for example, when we read that the *Will and Testament* resulted "from that mystic intercourse between Him Who communicated the generating influence of His divine purpose [Bahá'u'lláh] and the One Who was its vehicle and chosen recipient." ['Abdu'l-Bahá]. The mystic intercourse resulted in the birth of the Will as "the Child of the Covenant":

The Will may thus be acclaimed as the inevitable offspring resulting from that mystic intercourse between Him Who communicated the generating influence of His divine Purpose and the One Who was its vehicle and chosen recipient. Being the Child of the Covenant -- the Heir of both the Originator and the Interpreter of the Law of God -- the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá can no more be divorced from Him Who supplied the original and motivating impulse than from the One Who ultimately conceived it. Bahá'u'lláh's inscrutable purpose, we must ever bear in mind, has been so thoroughly infused into the conduct of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and their motives have been so closely wedded together, that the mere attempt to dissociate the teachings of the former from any system

which the ideal Exemplar of those same teachings has established would amount to a repudiation of one of the most sacred and basic truths of the Faith.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the exclusivist definitions that are found in the *Dispensation*, broad, inclusivist positions are also taken by Shoghi Effendi. His pronouncement on the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to its sister world religions represents a liberal inclusivism that validates, not only the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, but the world's religions that have preceded it. His statement amounts to a *magna carta* on progressive revelation and the oneness of religion, one that invites further exploration by scholars. Here, for example, is one major statement:

Nor does the Bahá'í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfillment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. It neither seeks to obscure their Divine origin, nor to dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements. It can countenance no attempt that seeks to distort their features or to stultify the truths which they instill. Its teachings do not deviate a hairbreadth from the verities they enshrine, nor does the weight of its message detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire. Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer has graphically expressed it, 'are doomed not to die, but to be reborn... 'Does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child nor youth perishes?'<sup>83</sup>

Consequently, for all his encomiums of the unique features of the Bahá'í Faith, one cannot argue that Shoghi Effendi was promoting an exclusive, religious nationalism, i.e. the

superiority of the Bahá'í Faith over the other world's religions. He was explicit on this point:

This same prophecy,<sup>84</sup> we must furthermore recognize, attests the independent character of the Bábí Dispensation and corroborates indirectly the truth that in accordance with the principle of progressive revelation every Manifestation of God must needs vouchsafe to the peoples of His day a measure of divine guidance ampler than any which a preceding and less receptive age could have received or appreciated. For this reason, *and not for any superior merit which the Bahá'í Faith may be said to inherently possess*, does this prophecy bear witness to the unrivaled power and glory with which the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh has been invested -- a Dispensation the potentialities of which we are but beginning to perceive and the full range of which we can never determine"<sup>85</sup> (italics mine).

Critiquing psychiatrist Dr. Seena Fazel, who types the Bahá'í Faith as pluralist in "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations,"<sup>86</sup> Grant Martin, in "Why the Bahá'í Faith is not Pluralist," has argued that Bahá'u'lláh's religion is instead a subtle synthesis of exclusivism and inclusivism.<sup>87</sup> Martin bases his argument on the views of philosophers of religion, Paul Griffiths<sup>88</sup> and John Hick,<sup>89</sup> interpreted in a Bahá'í perspective. I would agree with Martin that Bahá'í theology indicates a combination of exclusivist and inclusivist tenets regarding its relationship to the world's religions. However, in my view, it is not tenable to categorically exclude a "pluralist" dimension to the Bahá'í Faith: "...in other words, it [the Bahá'í Faith] is not pluralist."<sup>90</sup> A pluralist view could be maintained, in one of its dimensions, on the basis of progressive revelation, i.e. that the various world's religions form one organic whole even though they are revealed sequentially in historical time. Shoghi Effendi wrote: "... it [the Bahá'í Faith] proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind."<sup>91</sup> In other words, a plurality of faiths is recognized by the Guardian in this statement as being indispensable and integral to the religious history of humanity.

While the preceding statement tends to align the Bahá'í Faith with pluralism, Shoghi Effendi's position is more subtle and complex. Dann J. May was correct in cautioning against an oversimplification of Bahá'í inclusivism. In bold, kerygmatic

language, the Guardian proclaimed Bahá'u'lláh as the unique salvific figure for our age:

He Who in such dramatic circumstances was made to sustain the overpowering weight of so glorious a Mission was none other than the One Whom posterity will acclaim, and Whom innumerable followers already recognize, as the Judge, the Lawgiver and Redeemer of all mankind, as the Organizer of the entire planet, as the Unifier of the children of men, as the Inaugurator of the long-awaited millennium, as the Originator of a new "Universal Cycle," as the Establisher of the Most Great Peace, as the Fountain of the Most Great Justice, as the Proclaimer of the coming of age of the entire human race, as the Creator of a new World Order, and as the Inspirer and Founder of a world civilization.<sup>92</sup>

The Guardian's exclusivism, however, cannot be equated with Christian exclusivism. He does not view the Bahá'í religion as a "once and for all" revelation of divine truth, like the narrow proponents of Christian exclusivism as defined by Hick above and further in n. 89. The Guardian's liberal interpretation of the most exclusivist statement of Bahá'u'lláh, "No man can obtain everlasting life, unless he embraceth the truth of this inestimable, this wondrous, and sublime Revelation,"<sup>93</sup> does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that individual salvation is strictly confined only to those who believe in Bahá'u'lláh. This statement has to be understood in light of other Bahá'í texts such as this one: "Religion bestoweth upon man the most precious of all gifts, offereth the cup of prosperity, imparteth eternal life, and showereth imperishable benefits upon mankind."<sup>94</sup> One of the generic gifts of religion is the imparting of "eternal life," i.e. to the followers of all religions. The Guardian advised that Bahá'u'lláh's seemingly exclusive sentence "should not be taken literally: by 'everlasting life' is meant spiritual felicity, communion with the Divine Spirit."<sup>95</sup> (This interpretation does not entirely rule out difficulties without recourse to relativism or further contextualisation). Another statement of Shoghi Effendi supports the inclusivist view:

It should also be borne in mind that, great as is the power manifested by this Revelation and however vast the range of the Dispensation its Author has inaugurated, it emphatically repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind. To hold such a conception of its character and functions would be tantamount to a betrayal of its cause and a

denial of its truth. It must necessarily conflict with the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final. Indeed, the categorical rejection by the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh of the claim to finality which any religious system inaugurated by the Prophets of the past may advance is as clear and emphatic as their own refusal to claim that same finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified.<sup>96</sup>

In other words, Shoghi Effendi's theology may be simplified along the following lines: the Bahá'í revelation corresponds to the functional imperative of our age, that of global unity, in a type of Toynbeeian "challenge-and-response" model,<sup>97</sup> rather than from any supposed triumph of the faith of Bahá'u'lláh over its sister religions. Triumphalism has been specifically rejected by the Guardian—"nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims"--since it runs counter to the Bahá'í Faith's view of progressive revelation as a gradual unfoldment of one divine truth that has been one in its essence, while various in its manifestations, since it first appeared at the dawn of history. The Guardian wrote:

It [the Bahá'í Faith] is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.<sup>98</sup>

Viewed in this light, it becomes apparent that the Guardian's comparisons, while they are exclusivist in certain respects, are also inclusivist and relative. Dann J. May's observation seems accurate that attempts to perfectly match the Bahá'í Faith to the categories and typologies conceived by scholars remain elusive: "Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith continually frustrates [attempts at] such easy and simplistic classification."<sup>99</sup> Regarding the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist typology, the formula would seem to be that the Bahá'í Faith contains dimensions of all of them but none of them integrally and at one and the same time. May's argument is reasonable: perspectivism is required, one that uses the relativity of a sliding-scale, but one that does not

abolish fundamental Bahá'í beliefs. Such a task is complex and requires subtle and careful analysis.

## Shoghi Effendi's Apologetic Method of Comparison and the "New Comparativism"

It should be obvious from the above analysis that one principal feature of Shoghi Effendi's didactic method—and this is true not only for *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* but also for his epistolary generally—is to compare (similarities) and contrast (differences) of the unique features of the Bahá'í Faith with the history, teachings and organisations of the religions of past dispensations and/or the mores of contemporary society and the political realities of today's failed global civilization. This method of comparison and contrast has both theological, i.e. apologetic and literary functions. For example, in section (7), "The Balance of Positive and Negative Theology," the vibrant and confident spirituality shown by the Bahá'í community was contrasted with the deplorable lack of faith and morals that has led to universal desperation. In section (5), I observed that Shoghi Effendi defined the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá by comparing and contrasting those points that could be either included or excluded in his theological analysis.

The Guardian's comparative method establishes clearly defined theological doctrines which are accompanied by strong value-judgments. Both doctrines and value-judgments show a favourable prejudice either to the Bahá'í Faith, or to the vital function of religion in society,<sup>100</sup> or to the indispensable role of the prophets in the history of civilization, and the unfolding sequence of the world's revealed religions, a process he calls "the principle of progressive revelation."<sup>101</sup>

As an intellectual phenomenon, comparison would appear to be intrinsic to the operations of the human mind itself by which investigators compare data "...and group or classify them (Latin: *gener*, *genus*=class) according to generalizations they make about the similarities, and consequently the differences, among them."<sup>102</sup> However, the phenomenon of comparison, while it is widely used in religion, has not always met with approval. Literary, i.e. popular references have for centuries been generally disapproving of comparisons. John Lydgate's 1430 (?) edition of the *Fall of Princes* stated that "[c]omparisouns doon offte gret greuaunce."<sup>103</sup> Cervantes' dictum in the great Spanish classic *Don Quixote* has it that "...all comparisons are always odious (*odiosa*)."<sup>104</sup> The idea caught on with other writers, both

ancient and modern, and has appeared with little variation in the writings of the English jurist, John Fortescue, Jonathan Swift, John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Heywood, John Donne and George Herbert.<sup>105</sup> Shakespeare wrote an ironic variation in *Much Ado About Nothing*: "Comparisons are odorous" (act iii, sc. v).

In the academic study of religion, comparison has been so widely used since Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), one of "the founding fathers of comparative religion,"<sup>106</sup> and Oxford's first professor of comparative theology, laid the foundation for *Religionswissenschaft* in the late 19th century, that it has given its name to the method. While anthropologists have inconclusively debated the theories and methods involved in examining cross-cultural data, only recently has the comparative method come under some negative scrutiny in religious studies, especially in the scholarship of Jonathan Z. Smith and Luther H. Martin.<sup>107</sup>

Comparative religion originated in the encounters resulting from European exploration and colonial expansion and non-Christian cultures and civilizations between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Max Müller, who established a "scientific" methodology in religious studies, came to anticipate a "...new religion...for the whole world...firmly founded on a belief on the One God, the same in the Vedas, the same in the Old, the same in the New Testament, the same in the Korân, the same also in the hearts of those who have no longer any Vedas or Upanishads or any Sacred Books whatever between themselves and their God."<sup>108</sup> The great scholar based his comparison of religions on common genealogy and massive philological data. The cumulative result was the monumental fifty volume *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910), produced under his direction, that encompassed seven religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Islam.

Later comparativists, such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), found homologous patterns of essential religiosity within the multiplicity of the world's great religions, the religions of classical antiquity and the religions of societies without writing.<sup>109</sup> More recent comparativists, such as the celebrated dean of comparative religion, Huston Smith (1919-) and William Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), who in the opinion of John Hick (1922-) accomplished more than anyone else in the twentieth century to promote interreligious understanding based on the comparative method,<sup>110</sup> have expounded the "primordial tradition" (H. Smith) and "world theology" and "the psychic unity of



mankind" (W.C. Smith).<sup>111</sup>

The "new comparativism" proposed by Luther H. Martin and Jonathan Z. Smith critiques all previous comparative approaches for the following reasons: (1) the independent variables of religious symbols, ideas and experiences are culturally selective data and are not self-evident. They already "presume some operative theory of religion."<sup>112</sup> (2) Scholars who emphasize either similarities or differences in religion are merely engaging in "a reflexive exercise within the religious context of the observer."<sup>113</sup> (3) Syncretistic theories of religion based on cultural contact assume "some view of an original religiosity" which cannot be subjected to historical or anthropological research. These theories tend to be "retrojections of contemporary meanings" and are based on stereotypical assumptions.<sup>114</sup> (4) Theories of the "primordial tradition" that posit some essential unity of the world's religions à la Max Müller, Huston Smith or W.C. Smith, and which anticipate some coming form of world religious unity, are discounted as being "commonsensical," "propagandistic" and "serving the agenda of the comparativist."<sup>115</sup> Even such a fundamental religious category as the "sacred" is critiqued on the basis of its being derived from the "religious traditions of the Western scholar."<sup>116</sup>

The work of Martin and Smith that propose newer, more appropriate models of comparison is just the latest wrinkle in an ongoing methodological debate that surfaced in the 1970's and 1980's. Only hints of this debate can be given within these confines. Briefly, an emerging religious scientism attacked traditional theological, metaphysical and phenomenological approaches with sanitized, "scientific," agnostic or social-scientific approaches that purport to be objective and value-free.<sup>117</sup> These more recent approaches are based on the epistemic authority of the scientific method that has continued to grow since the Enlightenment. This methodological agnosticism would purge the study of religion from any theological or metaphysical bias, or religious sentiment, including the belief in God, the One or the Absolute, which its extreme proponents, like Donald Wiebe, view as infections.<sup>118</sup> (This explains my use of the word "sanitized").

The "naturalistic biases" of the new comparativism proposed by Martin and Smith view religion reductively as a collection of dependent variables that must conclude with "scientific generalizations" that must be based on "naturalistic theories of religion."<sup>119</sup> The new agnostic models, which banish God, faith and revealed religion from academic analysis, are borrowed

from cognitive psychology, with its “common mental constraints,” or from “biological substructures,” or a “non-ethnocentric framework,” or trans-historical “cross-cultural constraints,” or contemporary linguistics based on the work of Saussure at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, this agnostic methodology hesitatingly admits Max Weber’s theory of “ideal types,” but advises that this typology need not include his western categories of “god,” “priests,” “prophets,” “ethics” and “salvation religions.”<sup>120</sup> The new theory of ideal types purportedly must be based on scientific rather than religious or faith-based models that would neutralize cultural categories.

Shoghi Effendi’s operative theory of religion is decidedly at the antipodes of methodological agnosticism. While he emphasized that the Bahá’í Faith was “scientific in its method,”<sup>121</sup> the Guardian’s interpretations of the Bahá’í Faith, and the origin of the perennial phenomenon of religion, hold that the great monotheistic faiths trace their ultimate genesis to supernatural divine revelation and dispensational prophethood. His religious *Weltanschauung* is definitely not compatible with this current trend in religious studies which reduces religion to a sterile humanism based on a set of dependent variables deriving from naturalistic, psychological or social scientific theories. The Guardian’s religious viewpoint, it is important to note, does include cultural adaptation of the laws and teachings of the prophets to the varying cultural, historical, social and spiritual needs of humanity in space-time, and thus includes a certain view of relativism. But while the world’s religions, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have explained, admittedly suffer cyclical degradations in which “virtues are replaced by vices, and holiness and purity disappear”<sup>122</sup> and the “pristine purity”<sup>123</sup> of their essential message is obscured by human doctrinal accretions and errors, their genesis can in no way be explained solely on the basis of cultural or socio-biological factors—at least in Shoghi Effendi’s belief system.

However, in one definitive sense, the Guardian did take the position that “all comparisons are odious.” Although Shoghi Effendi clearly viewed the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh as belonging to the most recent species of the genus of revealed religion, and while he proposed certain commonalities between the Bahá’í Faith and the religions of past dispensations,<sup>124</sup> nonetheless, he held certain exclusive views that God’s most recent divine revelation belonged in a category by itself. His considered, but nonetheless strongly stated view, was that comparison was literally out of the question regarding the origin and

development of the Bahá'í Faith and what he viewed as fitful, momentary, ill-conceived secular movements:

How unfair, how irrelevant, to venture any comparison between the slow and gradual consolidation of the Faith proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh and those man-created movements which, having their origin in human desires and with their hopes centered on mortal dominion, must inevitably decline and perish! Springing from a finite mind, begotten of human fancy, and oftentimes the product of ill-conceived designs, such movements succeed, by reason of their novelty, their appeal to man's baser instincts and their dependence upon the resources of a sordid world, in dazzling for a time the eyes of men, only to plunge finally from the heights of their meteoric career into the darkness of oblivion, dissolved by the very forces that had assisted in their creation.<sup>125</sup>

The same is true for his view of the unique design of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh for which, he argued, no historical parallel could be found in the institutions of government, whether secular or religious. For comparisons are valid only when a basis for comparison exists:

A word should now be said regarding the theory on which this Administrative Order is based and the principle that must govern the operation of its chief institutions. It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions. Such an attempt would in itself betray a lack of complete appreciation of the excellence of the handiwork of its great Author. How could it be otherwise when we remember that this Order constitutes the very pattern of that divine civilization which the almighty Law of Bahá'u'lláh is designed to establish upon earth? The East or in the West, offer no adequate criterion wherewith to estimate the potency of its hidden virtues or to appraise the solidity of its foundations.<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

*The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (1934) is the seminal, central text in Shoghi Effendi's writings which he considered to be his last Will and Testament, i.e. the epitome of his understanding.

In defining the fundamental tenets of the stations of the Bahá'í Faith's Three Central Figures, the *Dispensation* not only created a distinctive, economical, theological idiom, but it also proactively resolved potentially divisive, complex theological questions, while leaving space for further scholarly commentary. This paper selectively examined the Guardian's definitions of the stations of the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá which he set in their proper perspective: that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was neither a mere interpreter, nor servant among servants, nor the return of Jesus Christ come "in the glory of the Father." Shoghi Effendi clarified the dual station of the Báb and corrected the misapprehension that had led some Bahá'ís to overestimate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station in relation to the Báb.

This paper partially explicated the Guardian's method, namely, a comparative apologetics based on "dogmatic" or exclusive interpretations, i.e. doctrines laid down by the strong interpretive authority accorded him by virtue of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament*. These interpretations do not exclude, however, relative, inclusive and pluralist statements *vis-à-vis* his understanding of progressive revelation, the oneness of religion, prophetology and the functional role of religion in the growth of civilization and the development of a sane society.

I have argued that a deep structure is inherent to Shoghi Effendi's thought that consists of the dynamic juxtaposition of positive and negative poles in the construction of his theological interpretations. The Guardian employs deductive logic as well as apodictic definitions which form the basis of his dialectic, i.e. the intuitive defining of first principles or fundamental truths.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Shoghi Effendi's comment reported by Rúhíyyih Rabbání that "he had said all he had to say, in many ways, in the *Dispensation*," Ali Nakhjjavani has written that "He [Shoghi Effendi] had actually told several Hands of the Cause and pilgrims that the *Dispensation* should be considered by the friends as his Will and testament." See n. 11 and Ali Nakhjjavani, "The Bahá'í Covenant," *Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs*, papers presented at the Irfán Colloquia and Seminars, Book 8, ed. Iraj Ayman (Evanston, IL: Bahá'í National Center, 2007), p. 308.

<sup>2</sup> The context of Shoghi Effendi's remarks concern "the character and functions" of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice but his remarks apply more broadly to "...this general exposition of the fundamental verities of the faith." Shoghi Effendi, "The Dispensation of

Bahá'u'lláh" in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 147. For brevity's sake, subsequent references to "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" will be abbreviated to the *Dispensation*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> The word "political" excludes its contemporary meaning of an expedient *rapprochement* based on the adversarial systems of political parties. It refers instead to the legitimacy and establishment of institutional practices and policies deriving from the Bahá'í belief and value system. The word political has a legitimate use in Bahá'í parlance and need not be banished from the discussion because of its association with party politics.

<sup>5</sup> "Indeed Shoghi Effendi had written that his "Dispensation" was to be considered as a "supplement" to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament." Ali Nakhjavani, "The Bahá'í Covenant," *Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs*, Book 8, 308. For the Guardian's original statement on the *Dispensation* as a "supplement" to the Will and Testament, see *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 1, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Dispensation, p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> The theologians who believed in the self-sufficiency and completeness of the Christian revelation were writing in the first half of the twentieth century and included Barth, Brunner, Cullman, Aulén, Nygren and Bonhoeffer. While there were differences among them *vis-à-vis* the possibility of natural theology, the role of philosophy in theology, and the relative truth and value of the non-Christian religions, all adhered to the fundamental position of the distinctiveness of Christianity and the insufficiency of philosophy, natural theology and the non-Christian religions. While Bahá'í theology is clearly "logocentric," i.e. teaches the necessity of belief in the self-sufficiency of the Divine Word, it diverges from such restrictive views. For a succinct overview of this school, see John Macquarrie, "The Theology of the Word" in *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought. The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology*, 1900-1960 (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 318-338.

<sup>9</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Dispensation* in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Rúhíyyih Rabbaní, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), 213.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> It was to legitimize the whole notion of Bahá'í theology that I edited *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1997). In the Introduction to that volume I wrote: "While the Bahá'í sacred writings shed much light on both ancient questions and contemporary issues, there is as yet no centuries-old tradition of theological and philosophical reflection on the Bahá'í revelation upon which to draw. Indeed, there are some who still reject the validity of the whole notion of Bahá'í theology itself, however broadly and carefully one defines the concept. The work of the present generation of scholars is consequently still very much ground-breaking, and I hope this volume will help water the seed bed that is now beginning to

flourish" (xiii). The respected German scholar, Dr. Udo Schaefer, the Hasan Balyuzi lecturer for the year 2002, has done more than any one to legitimize the notion of Bahá'í theology over the past forty years, without which, as he has often remarked, no self-respecting world religion can be taken seriously. "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology" in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, March-June, 1992, pp. 25-67 was also written with this purpose in mind.

- <sup>14</sup> Among those who opposed the concept of Bahá'í theology was a very emphatic Dr. Soheil Bushrui who told me in a telephone conversation circa 1990 that it was legitimate to speak of *fiqh* but that Bahá'í theology was unacceptable because it might resemble what Christians understand by the word. Neither did B. H. (Betty) Conow, based on the file of our paper correspondence in 1994, approve of the term Bahá'í theology. She wrote a paper called "East's Side, West's Side: All Around the Ology" in which she argued that theology had outlived its usefulness and should not be revived in the Bahá'í Faith. She favoured a more philosophical approach and argued that the proper term should be "divine philosophy." The difference struck me as purely semantic. What is divine philosophy if not philosophical theology, i.e. theology, since all theology has philosophical content, particularly in the Bahá'í Faith?
- <sup>15</sup> Jack McLean, "The Deification of Jesus," *World Order*, vol. 14, nos. 3 & 4, Spring/Summer, 1980, p.33, n. 31. The schism of Arius was condemned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a tablet to Roy Wilhelm, *Star of the West*, vol. 10 (June 5 1919), p. 95. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserted that "The Covenant of God shall remain stable and secure."
- <sup>16</sup> The word logocentrism was first coined by the German philosopher Ludwig Klages in the 1920's. It refers to the perception that discourse is intelligible by the presence of reason (*logos*) which lies at its center. By "logocentrism" I do not intend the postmodern use of the word, especially Derrida's deconstructionist use of it, which critiques reason in texts, i.e. logical, stable meanings, distinctions and inferences. (See *Of Grammatology*, trans. 1976). Here I use it in precisely the opposite way: to refer to a divine, universal, rational, principle which provides an explanation of the nature, origin and meaning of phenomena which is embodied in an intelligible structure or order consisting of stable meanings.
- <sup>17</sup> William S. Hatcher, "An Analysis of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*" in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the Association for Bahá'í Studies Ninth Annual Conference, 1984* (Ottawa: Bahá'í Studies Publications, 1993), p. 73.
- <sup>18</sup> Jack McLean, "The Deification of Jesus," p. 23.
- <sup>19</sup> This is Marzieh Gail's paraphrase. The Persian literally reads: "the foundations of fundamental divine questions and the complexity of the truth of religious beliefs." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 26.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, collected and translated by Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), pp. 180 and 248.
- <sup>21</sup> An unnamed pilgrim quoted by Rúhiyyih Rabbání, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 81.

- <sup>22</sup> *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages From the Universal House of Justice 1963-1968* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), pp. 87-88.
- <sup>23</sup> Küng wrote: "In fact, the gap between exegesis and systematic theology is the misery afflicting present day dogmatics." *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 194.
- <sup>24</sup> In Robert Browning's poem *Andrea del Sarto* (1855), titled after the painter by the same name (1486-1531), del Sarto addresses the painting of his dull-witted and unfaithful but beautiful wife Lucrezia whom he murdered: "Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged." In an essay by Rebecca Comay called "Almost Nothing: Heidegger and Mies," regarding the phrases "Less is more" and "almost nothing" (*beinahe nichts*) often attributed to Mies, Comay writes: "To my knowledge Mies never actually wrote those words." She attributes "Less is more" to the American modern architect Philip C. Johnson. *The Presence of Mies*, ed. Detlef Mertins, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), p. 179. This collection of essays relates, *inter alia*, Mies van der Rohe's concept of architecture to twentieth century philosophic concepts. Mies's defenders attribute the saying to van der Rohe nonetheless.
- <sup>25</sup> William S. Hatcher, "An Analysis of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*" in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*, p. 77.
- <sup>26</sup> *Dispensation in The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 123.
- <sup>27</sup> See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Spiritual Proofs," Chapter 14 of *Some Answered Question.*, pp. 75-77. In context, the spiritual proofs referred to by 'Abdu'l-Bahá implies the ability to perceive the seasonal and historical prophetic cycles whose beneficial effects have been exerted on civilization over the ages.
- <sup>28</sup> *Dispensation in The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 124
- <sup>29</sup> *Kitáb-i-Íqán* pp. 226-27.
- <sup>30</sup> Shoghi Effendi has written of the circumstances surrounding this dramatic declaration of the Báb: "The circumstances attending the examination of the Báb, as a result of so precipitate an act, may well rank as one of the chief landmarks of His dramatic career. The avowed purpose of that convocation was to arraign the Prisoner, and deliberate on the steps to be taken for the extirpation of His so-called heresy. It instead afforded Him the supreme opportunity of His mission to assert in public, formally and without any reservation, the claims inherent in His Revelation. In the official residence, and in the presence, of the governor of Ādhirbáyján, Násiri'd-Dín Mírzá, the heir to the throne; under the presidency of Hájí Mullá Mahmúd, the Nízamu'l-'Ulamá, the Prince's tutor; before the assembled ecclesiastical dignitaries of Tabríz, the leaders of the Shaykhí community, the Shaykhu'l-Islám, and the Imám-Jum'ih, the Báb, having seated Himself in the chief place which had been reserved for the Valí-'Ahd (the heir to the throne), gave, in ringing tones, His celebrated answer to the question put to Him by the President of that assembly. "I am," He exclaimed, "I am, I am the Promised One! I am the One Whose name you have for a thousand years invoked, at Whose mention you have risen, Whose advent you have longed to witness, and the hour of Whose Revelation you have prayed God to hasten. Verily, I say, it is incumbent upon the peoples of both the East and the West to obey My word, and to pledge allegiance to My person." *God Passes By*, p. 21.

- <sup>31</sup> On May 13, 1940 Churchill said in a short, simple but stirring speech during his inaugural address to the House of Commons as the newly elected Prime Minister of Great Britain: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." The phrase was repeated in other war speeches. Accessed @ [www.historyplace.com/speeches/churchill.htm](http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/churchill.htm).
- <sup>32</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 136.
- <sup>33</sup> "Deduction" in the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1968), p. 74.
- <sup>34</sup> The above quotations are from the *Dispensation* in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp.132, 137, 132.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 139.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 137.
- <sup>37</sup> A covenant-breaker is an individual or group of individuals who, for a variety of unsavory motives, deny, disregard or disobey the legally appointed head of the Bahá'í Faith in order to create a sect in the community and gain a following. For a definition of covenant-breakers and the necessity to shun them, see Ali Nakhjavani, "The Bahá'í Covenant," *Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs*, Book 8, pp. 302-03.
- <sup>38</sup> Shoghi Effendi uses this epithet to describe 'Abdu'l-Bahá' half-brother in *Bahíyyih Khánum: The Greatest Holy Leaf*, compilation by the Research Department (Haifa: World Centre Publications), p. 37. Accessed online @ [bahai-library.com/books/bahiiyyih.khanum/](http://bahai-library.com/books/bahiiyyih.khanum/)
- <sup>39</sup> Badí'u'lláh confessed that before his eyes he watched Muhammad-'Alí interpolate a tablet of Bahá'u'lláh from the pre-Akká period that condemns the misdeeds of Bahá'u'lláh's younger brother Mirzá Yahyá. Muhammad-'Alí changed the condemnatory words "My brother" (Yahyá) to "My Greatest Branch" (Abdu'l-Bahá). Muhammad-'Alí justified this action by saying that Bahá'u'lláh had given him permission to interpolate His writings for the protection of the Cause and that he needed to do this "to check His ['Abdu'l-Bahá's] influence." Badí'u'lláh quoted in Adib Taherzadeh, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1992), p. 153.
- <sup>40</sup> St. Thomas was the apostle to southern India. Tradition says that after being condemned to death, he was led out to a hill outside the city of King Misdai, where he died "pierced through with spears by four soldiers." "St. Thomas the Apostle," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14, 1912 accessed @ < [www.newadvent.org/cathen/14658b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14658b.htm)>.
- <sup>41</sup> Adib Taherzadeh, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 153. Here Badí'u'lláh is quoting the words of Muhammad-'Alí as reported in his letter of repentance.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice and translated by a committee at the Bahá'í World Center and by Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), p. 217.
- <sup>43</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 138.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97,98.
- <sup>46</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 137
- <sup>47</sup> *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 100
- <sup>48</sup> The complete quotation is "A text without a context is a pretext for a



proof text.” According to Dr. Donald A. Carson, professor of New Testament studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and prolific author of books on the evangelical perspective of the New Testament, his father, a Canadian minister, was the original source of the quotation. The maxim was intended to avoid exegetical fallacies. Accessed @ [www.fallacyfiles.org/quotcont.html](http://www.fallacyfiles.org/quotcont.html).

<sup>49</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 137

<sup>50</sup> The actual phrase quoted by Bahá'u'lláh is a hadith of Muhammad and was translated by Shoghi Effendi to signify the unity of the prophets with God as “This is the significance of the tradition: ‘I am He, Himself, and He is I, myself.’ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 100.

<sup>51</sup> *Dispensation*, p.139

<sup>52</sup> *God Passes By*, p. 257. Robert Stockman has informed me that this designation was originally recorded by Ahmad Sohrab in a tribute to Thornton Chase by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when the Master arrived in San Francisco on October 4, 1912. Mr. Chase died on September 30th. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá eulogized Mr. Chase at his graveside at the Inglewood cemetery in Los Angeles on October 19, 1912 at 1:00 p.m. in which he requested that “the friends of God must visit this grave and on my behalf bring flowers and seek the sublimity of the spiritual station for him....” *Star of the West*, vol. III, no. 13, November 4, 1912, p. 14. Dr. Stockman discusses William James and Edward Dennis becoming Bahá'ís prior to Mr. Chase. Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America. Vol. 1: Origins, 1892-1900* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), pp. 35-36.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America, Vol. 2: Early Expansion, 1900-1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995), Appendix 3.

<sup>54</sup> “That ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was neither an ordinary man nor a Manifestation of God was completely confusing to the American Christian mind. He did not fit into any category.” *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Early Expansion, 1900-1912*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995), p. 406. Appendix 3 on the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

<sup>55</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in J.A. McLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality: Reflections on the Meaning of Spiritual Life and Transformation in Light of the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994), p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in the North Hudson Board of Council Minute Book, entry of May 6, 1903, p. 68. From Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America*, Vol. 2, Appendix 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ali Kuli Khan to Hooper Harris, July 28, 1901 in *Ibid*, Appendix 3.

<sup>60</sup> Shoghi Effendi quoted ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “...I am the Interpreter of the Word of God; such is my interpretation.” *Dispensation*, p. 133.

<sup>61</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 151

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>63</sup> See “Via Negativa” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, editor-in-chief (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986), vol. 15, pp. 252-54. Cataphatic theology admits the use of analogies to describe God but declares that these analogies, like the denial of definitions in negative

theology, in no way describe Him. Thus the *via negativa* admits the truth of paradoxical statements in affirmations about God. The *via negativa* is also a way of mystical union with God found in such theologians as Dionysus the Areopagite and the fifteenth century German cardinal Nicholas of Cusa. The concept is also found in the eastern religious traditions, particularly in Buddhism. See for, example, "The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind" in *Zen Buddhism*, Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki, ed. William Barrett (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 157-226.

<sup>64</sup> "The Divinity Can Only Be Comprehended Through The Divine Manifestations" in *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148. For an excellent overview of apophatic theology in the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Bábí and Báha'í traditions, see Stephen N. Lambden's "The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábí and Báha'í Scripture" in *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Báha'í Theology*, volume eight in *Studies in the Bábí and Báha'í Religions*, ed. Jack McLean (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1997), pp. 37-78.

<sup>65</sup> *Dispensation*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>69</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 5

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>72</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 155.

<sup>73</sup> Shoghi Effendi put the matter simply: "As regards your question: Bahá'u'lláh is, of course, not God and not the Creator; but through Him we can know God...." From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, June 4, 1951 in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1553, p. 472.

<sup>74</sup> Shoghi Effendi wrote: "The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh should indeed be regarded, if we wish to be faithful to the tremendous implications of its message, as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations. These, beginning with Adam and ending with the Báb, have paved the way and anticipated with an ever-increasing emphasis the advent of that Day of Days in which He Who is the Promise of All Ages should be made manifest." *Dispensation*, p. 102.

<sup>75</sup> As well as my own readings, the discussion of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism has been informed by Grant Martin's paper "Why the Báha'í Faith is not Pluralist." The tripartite typology has been used mainly by Christian theologians and philosophers of religion to discuss whether or not non-Christians can be saved. See Martin's "Why the Báha'í Faith is not Pluralist" in *Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs*, Book 8, 2007, pp. 179-201.

<sup>76</sup> Dann J. May, "The Báha'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism" in *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Báha'í Theology*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>77</sup> See Martin, "Why the Báha'í Faith is not Pluralist" in *Lights of 'Irfán: Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs*, Book 8, 2007, pp. 179-201.

<sup>78</sup> For the quotation from Hick, see note 88.

<sup>79</sup> The complete quotation reads: "The Báha'í Cause is an inclusive movement; the teachings of all religions and societies are found here...The Báha'í message is a call to religious unity and not an invitation to a new religion, not a new path to immortality. God forbid! It is the ancient path cleared of the debris of imaginations and superstitions of men, of the debris of strife and misunderstanding." Quoted by Dann J. May in "The Báha'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism" in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Báha'í Theology*, volume eight in Studies in the Bábi and Báha'í Religions (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1997), pp. 19-20. The original source is not identified. May cites for the quotation in n. 75, Pritam Singh *God, His Mediator, and Man* (Wilmette: IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958), p. 14.

<sup>80</sup> See "The Trinity" in *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 113-15.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Tillich quoted in *Ultimate Concern*, ed. D. Mackenzie Brown (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 64-65.

<sup>82</sup> *Dispensation*, p.144.

<sup>83</sup> *Dispensation*, p.114.

<sup>84</sup> Shoghi Effendi is referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of a Zoroastrian prophecy of the latter days which predicts the lengths of the Muhammadan, Bábi and Bahá'í dispensations as lasting ten, twenty and thirty days respectively. In His interpretation of the thirty days, referring to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá comes up with "a period of at least five hundred thousand years," the length of the entire Bahá'í cycle. *Dispensation*, p.102. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has used a sliding-scale to determine the length of the three religious dispensations which are not, on first reading, apparent. But Shoghi Effendi has interpreted the thirty days representing 500,000 years astrologically as follows: "The thirty days in the last dispensation should not be reckoned numerically, but should be considered as symbolizing the incomparable greatness of the Bahá'í Revelation which, though not final is none-the-less thus far the fullest revelation of God to man. From a physical point of view, the thirty days represent the maximum time takes by the sun to pass through a sign of the zodiac. They thus represent a culminating point in the evolution of this star. So also from a spiritual standpoint these thirty days should be viewed as indicating the highest, though not the final stage in the spiritual evolution of mankind." From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, August 7, 1934, quoted in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 4th rev. edn. 1996), no. 1558.

<sup>85</sup> *Dispensation*, pp.102-103.

<sup>86</sup> See Seena Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations," in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Báha'í Theology*, pp. 127-152.

<sup>87</sup> Space is lacking here to summarize Martin's arguments for Báha'í exclusivism-inclusivism. The "categories" of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism were first conceived by Allan Race in 1983. As mentioned above, the typology was also elaborated by Dianna Eck, Gavin D'Costa, Paul Griffiths and others. John Hick's "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" (1984) and *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985) and especially *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the*

*Transcendent* (1989) added weight to the discussion. See Martin, pp. 179-201.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Griffiths, Catholic philosopher of religion at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in his *Problems of Religious Diversity* (2001), has reinterpreted the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism to defend exclusivism and inclusivism against pluralism. Grant Martin has adopted Griffiths' schema and has applied it to argue that the Bahá'í Faith is not pluralist. See pp. 190-199 of Martin.

<sup>89</sup> The categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism to analyze the relations among religions were used by John Hick in his essay "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" published in *The World's Religious Traditions: Essays in Honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984). While the tripartite typology is not univocal, John Hick interprets it this way: "...that salvation is restricted to this one group, the rest of mankind being either left out of account or explicitly excluded from the sphere of salvation" (exclusivism). The inclusivist view takes two turns: (1) the Roman Catholic belief that Christ's atonement redeems all of humanity even though individuals may be unaware of him. (2) the incarnate Christ, the universal divine Logos, accomplishes the work of salvation in and through other salvific figures. Thus one can speak of "anonymous Christians" (Karl Rahner) or "the unknown Christ of Hinduism." The pluralist view is "...the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions." These points from "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" in John Hick, ed., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 421-23.

<sup>90</sup> Grant Martin, "Why the Báha'í Faith is not Pluralist," p. 189.

<sup>91</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 58.

<sup>92</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>93</sup> *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 183.

<sup>94</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice and translated by Habib Taherzadeh with the assistance of a Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 130.

<sup>95</sup> *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1599, p. 483.

<sup>96</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 115.

<sup>97</sup> The challenge-and-response motif is one of Arnold Toynbee's major theories of the growth and decline of civilizations as elaborated in his massive ten volume *A Study of History*. The challenge-and-response motif appears especially in "V. Challenge and Response" of D.C. Somervell's abridgement of volumes 1-IV, pp. 60-79. *A Study of History*, abridged by D.C. Somervell (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2 vols. 1957).

<sup>98</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 58

<sup>99</sup> Dann J. May, "The Báha'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism," p 20.

- <sup>100</sup> The Guardian made the following comment about the eclipse of religion: "No wonder, therefore, that when, as a result of human perversity, the light of religion is quenched in men's hearts, and the divinely appointed Robe, designed to adorn the human temple, is deliberately discarded, a deplorable decline in the fortunes of humanity immediately sets in, bringing in its wake all the evils which a wayward soul is capable of revealing." *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 186. Compare this with Bahá'u'lláh's statement: "And now concerning thy question regarding the nature of religion. Know thou that they who are truly wise have likened the world unto the human temple. As the body of man needeth a garment to clothe it, so the body of mankind must needs be adorned with the mantle of justice and wisdom." *Gleanings*, p. 285.
- <sup>101</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 102.
- <sup>102</sup> Luther H. Martin, "Comparison," in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), p. 45.
- <sup>103</sup> Lydgate quoted in *ibid*, p. 45. The original quotation is found in *Lydgate's Fall of Princes* (ed. circa 1430).
- <sup>104</sup> This dictum is a compression of "... you do not know that comparisons...beauty with beauty, birth with birth are always odious." Part two, chapter one (Lockhart's edition).
- <sup>105</sup> Sir John Fortescue (*de laudibus Legum Angliae*), Swift (*Drapier's Letters*), Lyly (*Euphues*), Marlowe (*Lust's Dominion*), Heywood (*A Woman Killed With Kindness*), Donne (*Elegy*), Herbert (*Jacula Prudentum*). From [bartleby.com/100/113.html](http://bartleby.com/100/113.html) & [www.answers.com/topic/comparisons-are-odious](http://www.answers.com/topic/comparisons-are-odious)
- <sup>106</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1986), p. 252.
- <sup>107</sup> See Luther H. Martin, "Comparison," pp. 45-56.
- <sup>108</sup> Max Müller, quoted in "Comparison," p. 52. Original quotation from Müller's *Biographical Essays* (1884) (New York: Scribners), pp. 80-81.
- <sup>109</sup> "Comparison," p. 52.
- <sup>110</sup> Hick wrote that W.C. Smith was responsible "...more than any other single individual, for the change which has taken place within a single generation in the way in which many of us perceive the religious life of mankind." "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" in John Hick, ed., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 418.
- <sup>111</sup> "Comparison," p. 51. The timeless and spaceless primordial tradition is synonymous with the perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*). See Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (1976). In *Toward a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), W.C. Smith wrote that "Those who believe in the unity of mankind, and the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of mankind's religious history" 4
- <sup>112</sup> Luther H. Martin, "Comparison," p. 49.
- <sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.
- <sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.
- <sup>115</sup> "Comparison," p. 52.
- <sup>116</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, the debate between Charles Davis and Donald Wiebe in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* (1984). For the theological, i.e. faith inclusive view interacting with religious studies, read Charles Davis "Wherein there is no ecstasy," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1984, pp. 393-400. See Donald Wiebe's strong rejoinder that proposed instead an "objective," "detached," "scientific," anti-theological, secular humanistic view in "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion" in *ibid*, pp. 401-22. Philip Boo Riley gives a good historical account of the methodological quest in "Theology and/or religious studies: A case study of *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses*, 1971-1981" in *ibid*, pp. 423-44. For a view favorable to a self-conscious religiosity as the only adequate basis for the social scientific study of religion, see R.N. Bellah, "Christianity and Symbolic Realism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 9, 1970.

<sup>118</sup> See Donald Wiebe, "Modernism" in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), pp. 351-64. Wiebe wrote earlier, and his position has not changed since, that religious studies must be committed to "...an objective, detached, scientific understanding of religion wholly uninfected by any sentiment of religiosity." "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion" in *op. cit.*, p. 393.

<sup>119</sup> Luther H. Martin, "Comparison," p. 54.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

<sup>121</sup> Shoghi Effendi, letter of June 1933 to the High Commissioner of Palestine. Extract from Compilation of Letters and Extracts of Writings From the Guardian Published in the Bahá'í News of the United States (December 1924 - November 1934), no. 85.

This letter provides a cogent summary statement of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

<sup>122</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 75. The context in the talk "Spiritual Proofs" is the cyclical rise and fall of each world religion.

<sup>123</sup> The complete sentence reads: "Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations." The context is Shoghi Effendi's exposition of the station of Bahá'u'lláh which is accompanied by his usual cautionary or qualifying statement. *Dispensation*, p. 114.

<sup>124</sup> See n. 83.

<sup>125</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 54.

<sup>126</sup> *Dispensation*, p. 152.

# Insider and Outsider Scholarship in Bahá'í Studies

Moojan Momen

It is difficult to know whether, in discussing this subject, one should remain within the framework of the immediate matter at hand: that of scholarship on the Bahá'í community; or whether one should take the discussion deeper to the foundations of the problems which of course have been discussed over the centuries in debates over the relative value of the mind as against the heart, the analytic approach as against the holistic one, Enlightenment rationalism as against Romanticism. I feel that we cannot focus in on the specifics of the discussion without at least acknowledging the wider context in which the debate occurs. Therefore I am going to briefly outline the wider issues involved before focussing on the specifics of scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith.

The academic study of religion, the history of religions, the field that in German is known as *religionswissenschaft*, is firmly and for very good reasons wedded to a methodology that is rationalist, materialistic and historically-based - in the sense that all phenomena are seen to be rooted in, and therefore wholly derived from, preceding phenomena. This is the basis of the world view - the *weltanschauung* - of the academic world. Academic outsider scholars live within this construction of reality, this universe of discourse, and like all other human beings, they take this socially constructed reality to be reality itself. They take the methodology of scholarship that they have constructed within this universe of discourse and which is fully validated within that universe to be the only valid methodology of scholarship. They privilege statements made within their universe of discourse over those made from within a different universe.

So what objections do believing or insider scholars have to this methodology of the academy? The brief answer is none. Most scholars think that this methodology when applied with

rigour, flair and fair-mindedness produces knowledge of the greatest quality and depth. I cannot stress this too strongly because in debates that have gone on in the past, it has been claimed that insider scholars are somehow inimical to the academic methodology and this simply is not true.

The problem that insider scholars have is not with the academic methodology *per se*, but with the claim that this is the only pathway to true and certain knowledge -- the arrogation to this pathway of a claim of superiority and indeed of exclusivity. Insider scholars accept the methodology of rationalism and historically-based argumentation as a way of deriving knowledge, but they set alongside that other pathways to (and sources of) knowledge: intuitive knowledge (which 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as being the result of meditation, the mind conversing with the soul), a rootedness in the spiritual heritage of humanity and a belief that this world has a spiritual aspect alongside its physical aspect, the introduction of values and ethics into methodology, and lastly a belief in Divine Revelation. Ultimately these other methodologies yield criteria for truth that are unacceptable to the strict application of the academic methodology. They cannot be contained within either the academic universe of discourse or in the academic methodology.

Insider scholars, especially those who are academically trained, stand in a difficult place. They are on the interface between two different and in many ways incompatible universes of discourse. They have the responsibility of mediating the ideas of the academy to the world of the believer and also of correctly representing the world of the believer to the academy. Given the radical and foundational differences between the two universes, they are in the position of ultimately never fully satisfying either world -- the position of being criticised from both directions.

I want now to bring my presentation from generalities to a focus on the area of Bahá'í scholarship. Here I think it would be useful to distinguish between two areas: a core area which deals with the history and writings of the central figures and institution of the Bahá'í Faith where I think there will always be a clash between insider and outsider scholars, and a more peripheral area concerned with the rest of Bahá'í history and the application of Bahá'í teachings, where I think there is every prospect of a relatively conflict-free co-existence.

With regard to the core area, this is as I stated, an area where it seems to me that there will always be a conflict between



insider and outsider scholars because the conflict is not over facts that can be resolved by an appeal to the sources -- nor can the opinions and position of one side be overturned by the discovery of a new source of information. The differences are foundational and relate to the fact that statements are being made from within different universes of discourse. They are thus in essence not resolvable. There is a great deal we could talk about, but I want to focus on two key concepts that cause perhaps the greatest amount of conflict and where this matter of the existence of two separate universes of discourse stands in greatest contrast. The first of these is Divine Revelation, a concept that we have already mentioned above and which is one that I think outsider scholars understand even if they do not accept it. The second is the Bahá'í concept of the Covenant and here I think that many outsider scholars do not even understand the concept, especially its ramifications, let alone accept it.

Divine Revelation is the idea that a single individual has access to a source of knowledge that is outside this phenomenal and contingent world. This idea of the authority of the words and ideas of a particular individual, Bahá'u'lláh, and the assertion that he is outside the contingencies of history and of the relativism of knowledge to which all human beings are subject is alien to the academic mind. Academic outsider scholars will insist on treating Bahá'u'lláh as a product of his times, whose ideas and teachings were derived from his education, his milieu and life experiences and his interactions with others. Insider scholars will understand such presentations of Bahá'u'lláh but will think them both inadequate and distorted. They will insist that, although the time, context and culture within the setting of which Bahá'u'lláh's words were written can provide useful information about how these words should be understood, these words can also be legitimately understood in ways that are outside this setting.

The second area that I want to speak about is that of the Bahá'í concept of the Covenant. This is an especially revealing example because it sets up axioms that verge on being unintelligible to the academic; for example, the idea that when Shoghi Effendi is engaged in interpreting one of the passages of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, he is not deriving interpretations that are based on his own understanding and experience (the historical contingency of being Shoghi Effendi), but rather they are the result of some supra-natural guidance being imparted by Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi's words, in these circumstances, impart the import that Bahá'u'lláh himself wishes to give these

word. Similarly, the concept of the Covenant implies that, when the Universal House of Justice is engaged in its work of legislation or in leading the Bahá'í community, then its decisions are not the result of a balance among the various human personalities that sit upon the House of Justice but are again supra-mundanelly guided by Bahá'u'lláh. Such concepts lead inevitably to accusations by outsiders that insider scholars privilege the statements of the central authorities in the Bahá'í Faith over the statements of others. They lead to accusations of anachronism, where the authority of Shoghi Effendi is used to define what Bahá'u'lláh meant. And of course, they lead to frustration among outsider academics that Bahá'ís refuse to limit their analyses of Bahá'u'lláh's words to the prevailing academic methodologies.

Thus I would maintain that scholarship in this core area from an outsider perspective is fated to always be in conflict with the Bahá'í community and insider scholars are fated to stand in an uncomfortable intermediary role between two universes in discord. Disagreements between insider and outsider academics over points in this core area are fated to remain unresolved and unresolvable, with neither side fully comprehending the other.

In the area of the periphery, however, there is much less likelihood of conflict occurring. Historical or sociological studies of Bahá'í communities or the broad area that could be described as applied Bahá'í studies do not inherently have the same problems as the core area. At the periphery, one is dealing with ordinary Bahá'ís, their lives and their attempts to put into practice the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In this area, scholars, whether insiders or outsiders, are free to postulate that individuals act in accordance with contingent influences upon them -- their culture, education and life experiences; the statements of particular individuals are not privileged over those of others and, while popular Bahá'í literature may often have recourse to the supra-natural, Bahá'í scholars will usually not.

Is it an implication of what I have written that it is not possible for a Bahá'í scholar to do good academic scholarship in the core area? I think not. While the theory may be that good academic scholarship is based on a cold, neutral, detached, agnostic, objective methodology, in practice the best scholarship emerges from those who are enthusiastic, passionate and involved. In the area of Bahá'í studies, we need look no further than the early years of E G Browne, the founder of the

field. His enthusiasm, passion and involvement cannot be doubted. The same characteristics led him later to a similar passionate involvement in the Persian Constitutional Revolution on the side of the Constitutionalists. Indeed, I would argue that it is Browne's very passion and involvement with his subject that makes his scholarship so compelling. Thus I see no reason to suggest that just because a person is involved in their subject they are therefore necessarily incapable of good scholarship. Insider academic scholarship is however a difficult endeavour -- being placed in between two universes that are in conflict and having to reflect and explain each to the other.

Lastly, do I think that it is impossible for an outsider to do good scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith? No, I think an outsider has every chance of seeing things from a new perspective, and therefore seeing aspects of the Bahá'í Faith that insider scholars may miss because of their insider perspective. Therefore I welcome and look forward to increasing amounts of outsider scholarship. The only proviso that I would make in this regard however is that the outsider scholar must be sincerely seeking knowledge and truth -- not using a veneer of academic methodology to camouflage a prejudice against the Bahá'í Faith nor an agenda against the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith. For just as I think an enthusiasm and a genuine sense of warmth and empathy for one's subject is an important ingredient of good scholarship -- so I think a prejudice or concealed hatred of one's subject matter results in distortion and poor scholarship.

(A presentation prepared for the conference in Copenhagen on "Globalisation and the Bahá'í Faith" August 2001)

# The Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace\*

`Ali Nakhjavani

Looking at the Writings of Shoghi Effendi in English, one can readily observe how he was able -- through his marvellously creative pen -- to give a comprehensive description and an all-embracing analysis of the state of the world today. The reader could clearly perceive why such extraordinary developments in social, political, economic, scientific and cultural affairs have taken place; why these developments continue to be on the rise; how humanity would be influenced by them; what stages of growth society at large would need to traverse; and to what ultimate station would humanity be led.

According to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, in whatever age the Manifestations of God appear, they guide humanity to more elevated levels of spiritual as well as material advancements; and, although these advancements are all positive in themselves, their establishment requires a destruction of the foundations of the old order so that a new divine civilisation may be established upon its ruins. Consider the sun and how -- on the one hand -- it is able to melt the snow over the mountains, creating frightening floods that lead to havoc and the destruction of cities, villages and hamlets; but -- on the other hand -- how it can produce the heat and light necessary for the growth of vegetation and all other living things. It can therefore be noted that now that the Sun of Truth has dawned from the Horizon of the Cause of the Blessed Beauty, both of these processes need to unfold on a global level. In other words, one can notice the signs of destruction -- or the negative aspects -- as well as the signs of construction -- or the positive aspects.

Bahá'u'lláh has described the destruction of the world and all that is therein by the following statement:

*Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead. (GWB 7)*

And also:

*The time for the destruction of the world and its people hath arrived.* (ADJ 81)

And again:

*From two ranks amongst men power hath been seized: kings and ecclesiastics.* (PDC 20)

Yet again:

*The whole earth is now in a state of pregnancy...the day is approaching when it will have yielded its noblest fruits, when from it will have sprung forth the loftiest trees, the most enchanting blossoms, the most heavenly blessings.* (GPB 217)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has also referred to these parallel processes in His Writings. He says:

*...these chronic diseases shall never be healed; nay, they shall grow fiercer from day to day...* (SWAB 249)

And about the positive effects of these developments He says:

*Thus the world of humanity will be wholly transformed and the merciful bounties become manifest.* (SWAB 282)

The negative evidences of these developments are abasement, destruction and chaos in society; while their positive impacts are the progress and the expansion of the Cause of God on earth. Made explicit in texts from the Holy Writings, the starting point of these two parallel processes was the Declaration of the Blessed Báb in Shiraz in 1260 AH or 1844 AD.

There are references both in the Bible and in the Qur’an to the fact that the commencement of these processes would coincide with the advent of the Promised Day. For example it is written in the Bible:

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.* (Revelations 21:1)

And in the Qur’an, it is written:

*One day the earth will be changed to a different earth, and so will be the heavens.* (Q 14:48)

It is clear that by “earth” here is meant the temporal civilization, and by the “heavens” is meant the heavens of divine Revelation, as stated in the Kitáb-i-Şqán by the Blessed Beauty.

In describing these two-fold processes, Shoghi Effendi has written the following:

A twofold process, however, can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive. The former, as it steadily evolves, unfolds a System which may well serve as a pattern for that world polity towards which a strangely-disordered world is continually advancing; while the latter, as its disintegrating influence deepens, tends to tear down, with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal. The constructive process stands associated with the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and is the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must ere long establish. The destructive forces that characterize the other should be identified with a civilization that has refused to answer to the expectation of a new age, and is consequently falling into chaos and decline. (WOB 170)

In his Writings, the beloved Guardian also refers to a third process, which consists of positive advancements that are taking shape in the world -- independent of the direct involvement of the Bahá'í community. Nevertheless, since this third process is indirectly derived from the life-giving influences of the Cause of God, it is in harmony with the spirit of the Bahá'í Teachings. Shoghi Effendi's statement in this regard is as follows:

“So marvellous a conception finds its earliest manifestations in the efforts consciously exerted and the modest beginnings already achieved by the declared adherents of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh who, conscious of the sublimity of their calling and initiated into the ennobling principles of His Administration, are forging ahead to establish His Kingdom on this earth. It has its indirect manifestations in the gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society.” (WOB 191)

After the First World War, in the midst of the afflictions

facing the entire human race, the League of Nations was established in 1920. Although this League was confronted with numerous difficulties, still its establishment was -- from a global political point of view -- the first significant step taken in this path and in absolute harmony with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Shoghi Effendi has stated the following in this regard:

For the first time in the history of humanity the system of collective security, foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh and explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has been seriously envisaged, discussed and tested. (WOB 191)

Regarding the Unity of Mankind proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh as the cornerstone of His All-embracing Dominion, Shoghi Effendi states:

Uttered at a time when its possibility had not yet been seriously envisaged in any part of the world, it has, by virtue of that celestial potency which the Spirit of Bahá'u'lláh has breathed into it, come at last to be regarded, by an increasing number of thoughtful men, not only as an approaching possibility, but as the necessary outcome of the forces now operating in the world. (WOB 47)

After the Second World War, in 1945 the League of Nations was changed to The United Nations Organisation, which has since been going through its process of growth and development. It has of course encountered many problems and difficulties such as determining the number of the members of its Security Council or issues pertaining to veto rights; however, as foreseen by Bahá'u'lláh, this organisation must indeed complete its evolutionary growth towards its state of maturity, which is none other than the establishment of the Lesser Peace envisaged by the Blessed Beauty.

Bahá'u'lláh has stated, addressing the kings and rulers of the world:

*Now that ye have refused the Most Great Peace, hold ye fast unto this, the Lesser Peace, that haply ye may in some degree better your own condition and that of your dependents. (GWB 253)*

This Lesser Peace is one that is solely founded upon political considerations and requirements. In other words, although its

future constitution will -- to some extent -- be influenced by moral and ethical standards, it will undoubtedly be devoid of the bounty of the spiritual principles of the Cause of God. For example, even though the Lesser Peace would undoubtedly ensure equality of rights for all and the honouring of individual or collective beliefs, yet we must bear in mind that there is a tremendous difference between the observance of human rights -- which is a worldly and legal matter -- and the necessity for the complete eradication of religious and racial prejudices, which is a spiritual condition and a matter of conscience.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, there appeared a debate amongst the friends with regards to the Tablet of the Seven Candles of Unity, in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*The fifth candle is the unity of nations -- a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland. (SWAB 32)*

Some friends therefore concluded that the Lesser Peace must be fully established by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This conclusion of course stands in contradiction with the statement of Shoghi Effendi in a letter dated 1946 to one of the friends in the West. In this letter, the beloved Guardian clearly indicates that the time for the fulfilment of the establishment of the Lesser Peace is not determined:

All we know is that the Lesser and the Most Great Peace will come -- their exact dates we do not know. (LOG 434)

If we ponder closely on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words concerning the unity of nations, it will become evident that He is not speaking of the Lesser Peace; but rather He is stating that under the fifth candle of unity and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a unity will be established, "...causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland." Considering the earth as one country is of course not the same as establishing the Lesser Peace. What 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates is that the scientific explorations of the twentieth century on the one hand and economic relations on the other will undoubtedly prove to the inhabitants of the earth that the planet is indeed one country. This was of course proven in practicality, especially when astronauts managed to take some beautiful aerial photographs of the planet earth, which were widely published.

As for the Great Peace, Bahá'u'lláh describes this process as



follows:

*The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch... If the rulers and kings of the earth, the symbols of the power of God, exalted be His glory, arise and resolve to dedicate themselves to whatever will promote the highest interests of the whole of humanity, the reign of justice will assuredly be established amongst the children of men, and the effulgence of its light will envelop the whole earth... The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men... This will ensure the peace and composure of every people, government and nation. (TAB 163)*

In connection with this Great Peace, Shoghi Effendi writes:

A world community in which all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished and the interdependence of Capital and Labor definitely recognized; in which the clamor of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled; in which the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished; in which a single code of international law -- the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives -- shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units; and finally a world community in which the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding consciousness of world citizenship -- such indeed, appears, in its broadest outline, the Order anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh, an Order that shall come to be regarded as the fairest fruit of a slowly maturing age. (WOB 40)

This statement by the beloved Guardian requires careful attention, for it speaks of religious and racial prejudices, and specifies that it is through the process of the Great Peace that the "clamour of religious fanaticism" and "the flame of racial animosity" will finally be wiped out entirely from the face of the earth. Here, one can easily deduce that unfortunately under the Lesser Peace, religious strife and racial prejudice will not

have entirely left the hearts and souls of the human race. However, by the emergence of the Great Peace, the Bahá'í Teachings will have beyond any doubt penetrated the organs of the Lesser Peace, leaving no room for religious and racial prejudices and thus healing the world's spiritual ailments with the blessings of the divine panacea.

Let us consider the Most Great Peace now. Shoghi Effendi provides the following explanation:

The Most Great Peace, on the other hand, as conceived by Bahá'u'lláh -- a peace that must inevitably follow as the practical consequence of the spiritualization of the world and the fusion of all its races, creeds, classes and nations -- can rest on no other basis, and can be preserved through no other agency, except the divinely appointed ordinances that are implicit in the World Order that stands associated with His Holy Name. In His Tablet, revealed almost seventy years ago to Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh, alluding to this Most Great Peace, has declared: "That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith. This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician. This, verily, is the truth and all else naught but error... (WOB 162)

And again the beloved Guardian quotes from one of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh:

*It beseemeth all men in this Day...to take firm hold on the Most Great Name, and to establish the unity of all mankind. There is no place to flee to, no refuge that any one can seek, except Him. (WOB 163)*

Shoghi Effendi offers a detailed exposition, outlining and explaining the conditions which will come into place in the world of being, as a result of the establishment of the Most Great Peace. Here are some extracts from his statements regarding this matter:

"In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop... Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be

consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation -- such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving." (WOB 203)

'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* describes the Most Great Peace as follows:

*One of the great events which is to occur in the Day of the manifestation of that Incomparable Branch (Bahá'u'lláh) is the hoisting of the Standard of God among all nations. By this is meant that all nations and kindreds will be gathered together under the shadow of this Divine Banner, which is no other than the Lordly Branch itself, and will become a single nation. Religious and sectarian antagonism, the hostility of races and peoples, and differences among nations, will be eliminated. All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland, which is the planet itself. (SAQ 65)*

It is therefore clear that upon the establishment of the Most Great Peace, all the divine laws and ordinances revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in other Bahá'í Holy Writings will be officially implemented. This peace will not be merely for the fortification of the basis of a political unity; nor is it solely intended to promote a spirit of brotherhood or the abolishment of racial prejudice and religious fanaticism. These achievements

in removing all traces of prejudice are all features of the Great Peace. The Most Great Peace will ensure the greater expansion of the Bahá'í Teachings with a wider and more effectively penetrating influence upon the world and its inhabitants, inasmuch as under the Most Great Peace, "all men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people."

It can therefore be concluded that humanity has three processes ahead of itself: the Lesser Peace, the Great Peace and the Most Great Peace.

The Lesser Peace is one that will - as explained before - be established through the efforts of the nations of the world, and will be regarded by them as the last and only remaining solution to their political ordeals. It can be said that this development may indeed reflect the maturity of the United Nations; a stage which will be reached through the severity of the trials and tribulations heaped upon the peoples and nations of the world. All these nations will voluntarily - and by force if necessary - come under this political unification; for they will realise that they have no other recourse but to establish one official world government. This world government will have the power to limit justly the unbridled authority exercised by some of the governments today, and subordinate national interests to whatever promotes the welfare of humanity.

The Great Peace is the next stage following the Lesser Peace and a prelude to the Most Great Peace. This Peace will come about through the operations of the Major Plan of God and the pervading influence of the Divine Will. Moreover, it constitutes -- as indicated in the Holy Writings -- the Order designed by the Blessed Beauty, inasmuch as the Bahá'í International Institutions at that time will be in a position to inspire the work of the world federation and all its branches and to guide its operation in conformity with the spirit of the Teachings of the Faith -- which are all based on the principle of the unity of mankind.

As for the Most Great Peace: this Peace is the ultimate peace promised to all the peoples and nations. It is a peace, the features of which are all derived from the Teachings of the Blessed Beauty. This peace will embody secular and administrative factors as well as spiritual and divinely ordained principles, so that material requirements and spiritual standards may completely integrate and marvellously blend together. This world embracing New World Order will establish a civilization

which is neither of the East nor of the West and which has been promised by all the religions of the past.

We all know that the current Local and National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'í World each exercise (within their own jurisdiction) legislative, executive and judicial powers, enabling them to conduct the spiritual and administrative affairs of the community. However, it is also clear that these three powers will in the future be separated in accordance with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The Spiritual Assemblies -- which will later be named Local and National Houses of Justice -- will as a result of this separation of powers become the legislative arm under whose aegis the two other divisions, namely the executive and the judiciary, will be established and will operate in conjunction with their subsidiary agencies. This separation of powers will undoubtedly be realised on the international level as well.

One of the distinguishing features of the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh as compared to other secular disciplines in the world is that the central axis of the institutions of the Faith is the legislative power, meaning the Houses of Justice; while in secular organisations, it is normally the executive power that governs. In two of his letters (The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 40, p. 162), the beloved Guardian offers separate explanations with regard to the Great Peace and the Most Great Peace. In the case of the Great peace, the executive power is given precedence, while in the case of the Most Great peace, it is the legislative power that comes first. This legislative power -- as explained above -- is represented by the Houses of Justice, be they local, national or international.

Concerning the importance and the necessity of the establishment of the Lesser Peace, Shoghi Effendi has given us the following comprehensive and remarkable statement in one of his letters, and with it we will conclude this article:

“The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and

capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life.” (WOB 202)

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\* This is the English version of the Persian text published in *Safini-yi 'Irfán*, Book Ten, 2007

# The Súrat al-mulk and the Súrat al-mulúk

## A Preliminary Comparison

Sholeh A. Quinn

Throughout the course of their lives, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, founders of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, respectively, addressed proclamatory letters to the rulers of the world collectively, and to specific individuals amongst them, especially those in various Middle Eastern regions. In so doing, they followed an ancient tradition of prophets addressing kings. The Báb addressed kings and rulers in the first chapter of one of his earliest writings, the *Qayyúm al-asmá*. This chapter is entitled the Súrat al-mulk, or Súrah (Chapter) of the dominion. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh addressed the world's leaders in numerous of his writings, most notably, perhaps, in his Súrat al-mulúk, or Súrah (Chapter) to the Kings. Although Bahá'u'lláh does not specify a direct connection between his work and the Súrat al-mulk, numerous themes in the Súrat al-mulúk echo the Súrat al-mulk, as do the title and certain phrases of the Tablet.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the Súrat al-mulk and the Súrat al-mulúk, focusing on the theme of kings and viziers in both of these writings. Such a comparison highlights and brings into focus the similarities and differences in the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, and the nature of their founders' attitudes towards notions of authority.

## Pre-19th Century Islamicate Kingship

The history of the Middle East generally and Iran specifically has a rich tradition of kingship, stretching far back into the pre-Islamic period. So that we may better understand the nature of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh's statements to kings, here follows a brief overview of the history of kingship in the Islamic world, with particular emphasis on Iran.

Iran had experienced a long history of kingship by the time

Islamic rule established itself in the country and put an end to the Sasanian dynasty. Successive Islamic dynasties that ruled over Iran, beginning with the Umayyads and the Abbasids, led to the articulation of new forms of authority and political legitimacy. Whereas kings had ruled as the *sháhansháh*, or king of kings, the caliphs based their legitimacy on their claim of succession to the prophet Muhammad. When the 'Abbasids came to power in the eighth century, they transferred the capital of the empire from Damascus to Baghdad, resulting in a strong Sasanian influence on their style of rulership. Indeed, 'Abbasid caliphs lived in palaces and held ceremonies similar to those of Persian kings.

We must look to the later 'Abbasid period, however, when the entire Middle East witnessed a long period of political fragmentation and decentralization, for movements in which Persian kingship was revived. Between the years 950-1258, as 'Abbasid rule diminished and gradually became restricted to the city of Baghdad, leaders who carved out territory for themselves and their descendants came to rule Iran, while at the same time acknowledging the religious authority of the caliph in Baghdad. These individuals claimed political authority for themselves and legitimized their rule through, for example, attaching old pre-Islamic titles such as *sháhansháh* ("king of kings") to their names, and forging genealogies showing descent from Iran's pre-Islamic kings.

In 1258, Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan (Chingiz Khan), invaded the Middle East, sacked the city of Baghdad, which had long been a center of culture and learning, and brought an end to the Abbasid caliphate. The Mongols brought with them their own notions of kingship, based on nomadic and steppe principles of authority. The destruction of the caliphate meant that post-caliphal rulers had to work out other ways to legitimize their rule, often by combining pre-Islamic and/or Perso-Turko-Mongol forms of kingship.<sup>2</sup>

When the Safavid dynasty came to power in the 16th century, new ideas of political legitimacy and kingship emerged, which blended with older theories and currents. After the Safavids established Twelver Shi'ism as the official state religion in 1501, imposing it upon a country where the majority of the population was Sunni, a class of Shi'i religious clerics gradually became increasingly powerful and in challenged the way in which Safavid kings were legitimizing their rule. Safavid kingship rested on three main pillars: the Safavid ruler as head



(shaykh) of the Safaviyya Sufi order which brought the Safavids to power, the Safavid ruler as descendant of Músá al-Kázim, the seventh imam of the Twelver Shi'a and therefore ruler in the name of the Hidden Imam, and the Safavid ruler as the shadow of God on earth in line with pre-Islamic Iranian notions of kingship.

## **Qajar Kingship**

In the late-18th to 19th centuries, the Qajar dynasty ruled Iran. The Qajars were one of original Turkic Qizilbash tribes that put the Safavid Shah Ismá'il in power. The Qajars rose to power in the wake of political fragmentation and decentralized rule in Iran following the fall of the Safavids. In his biography of Násir al-Dín Shah (r. 1848-1896), Abbas Amanat characterizes the legitimacy of Qajar kings as having four major dimensions: (1) the pre-Islamic Persian dimension, (2) the Islamic/Shi'ite dimension, (3) the nomadic concept of power and leadership, and (4) the Western/European model of government.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Súrat al-Mulk and the Súrat al-Mulúk: Some introductory information**

The Báb revealed his Súrat al-mulk in 1844 in his home in Shiraz to Mullá Ḥusayn Bushrúí, who became his first major disciple. This first chapter of the *Qayyúm al-asmá'* (hereafter *QA*), it consists of some 960 words in translation. Although the *QA* has not been published or fully translated into English, Stephen Lambden has electronically published a partial translation and commentary of several chapters on his website, including a complete translation of the Súrat al-mulk.<sup>4</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the history of the word *mulk* and notions of sovereignty throughout Islamic history. Two examples, however, illustrate how the word has been used within the context of conceptions of sovereignty and authority. Qur'an 3:26 expresses the notion that God possesses true sovereignty and rulers derive it from him:

*Say: 'Lord, Sovereign of all sovereignty (málik al-mulk), You bestow sovereignty (mulk) on whom You will and take it away from whom You please; You exalt whomever You will and abase whomever You please. In Your hand lies all that is good; You have power over all things.'* (Q. 3:26)

A 17th century tract on kingship by Mullá Muhsin Fayd (Fayd

Káshání), known as the *Á'ina-yi sháhí*, written for the Safavid Shah 'Abbás II, also makes use of the word *mulk* in connection with the need for sovereigns to obey "revealed law":

Whenever the sovereign obeys the revealed law and follows its commands, the outward appearance of the cosmos, known as the "Kingdom" (*mulk*), follows the inward reality of the cosmos, known as the "Dominion" (*malakut*)....But whenever the sovereign does not obey the revealed law, intellects are made prisoners of the senses and the Dominion is subjected to the Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh composed his *Súrat al-mulúk* in Edirne in fall-winter 1867[-68], so some 23 years, then, separate these two works. The *Súrat al-mulúk* appears to be the earliest surviving work of Bahá'u'lláh to address kings.<sup>6</sup> The translated text numbers some 15,000 words, making it roughly 15 times longer than the *Súrat al-mulk*. Much more scholarship exists on the *Súrat al-mulúk* than the *QA/Súrat al-mulk*.<sup>7</sup>

## Addressees

In an attempt to establish the primary similarities and differences between these two texts, what follows are some very basic comparative points, beginning with intended audience, or addressees. The Báb addresses several audiences in the *Súrat al-mulk*. These include three general groups and two specific individuals, as follows:

concourse of kings and the sons of kings  
King of Islam [=Muhammad Shah]  
Minister of the Shah [=Hájji Mírzá Áqásí]  
servants of the all-merciful  
people of the earth

Bahá'u'lláh, similarly, addresses more than one audience in the *Súrat al-mulúk*, but here we come to the first major difference between these two texts: the addressees the *Súrat al-mulúk* are far more varied and more specific than the addressees of the *Súrat al-mulk*. The audiences that Bahá'u'lláh addresses include the following:

people of the earth  
kings  
sultans

Christian kings  
 ambassador of the king of Paris  
 servant  
 people of the city  
 people  
 deputies (viziers Fuad and Ali Pasha?)  
 sultan (Sultan 'Abd al-Azíz)  
 king  
 Persian ambassador in the city (Hajjí Mírzá Husayn Khán,  
 the Mushír al-Dawlah, Persian ambassador in Istanbul)  
 people of the East (Iran)  
 shaykhs of the city (Istanbul)  
 hakims of the city and philosophers of the earth

Obviously, it will take some time to identify all of the specific individuals listed here, a task that is beyond the scope of this short presentation. Some of the individuals have been tentatively or definitively identified by Taherzadeh and others. For example, the Sultan is the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Aziz, the ministers include the well-known Pashas, Ali (grand vizier) and Fuad (the foreign minister); the Persian ambassador, Hajjí Mírzá Husayn Khan, the Mushir al-Dawlah. Another vizier that Bahá'u'lláh alludes to is Mírzá Buzurg Khan, the Persian Consul-General in Baghdad.<sup>8</sup>

## The Obligations of Kings in General

Turning now to one of the specific categories of addressees in the Súrat al-mulk and the Súrat al-mulúk, namely kings, the Báb's statements in the Súrat al-mulk to kings in general and to Muhammad Shah in particular are outlined most specifically in QA 1: 22-29. These verses form a discrete portion of the chapter, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. This section opens with an address to kings and the sons of kings:

O concourse of kings and the sons of kings! (*yá ma'shar al-mulúk wa abná' al-mulúk*)

Lay aside, one and all [in truth, as befits the Truth] your dominion which belongeth unto God (*mulk Alláh*).<sup>9</sup>

The section concludes with a final emphatic call to kings in general, the same kings and sons of kings that the Báb addressed at the beginning of the section. This passage can be read with

QA 1:20 as the end of one complete sentence or phrase. In this final portion, the Báb specifies what it means for kings to lay aside their sovereignty (*mulk*):

And [O kings!] give aid towards victory before God through thy very own selves and thy swords (*bi-anfusikum wa asyáfikum*) in the shade of the Most Great Remembrance (*al-dhikr al-akbar*) for the sake of this pure Religion (*al-dín al-khálisú*) which is, in very truth, mighty.<sup>10</sup>

Here, the Báb expresses sovereignty in a complex manner. First and foremost, sovereignty belongs to God, and kings should lay aside their own sovereignty because, apparently, the eschaton has arrived. If kings have any interest in preserving their sovereignty or *mulk* in the next world, which appears to be the only place where they can enjoy any dominion whatsoever, then they must come to the assistance of the Báb in this world, aiding him to spread his religion by means of their swords. Much of what the Báb has to say about jihad and holy war, which is what the “swords” passage in the Súrat al-mulk alludes to, has to do with the expectations that his audience had of the messiah, the *qa'im*, conquering the world through force and propagating a universal Shi'i religion. In accordance with the predictions in Shi'i hadith literatures of eschatological holy war, the mahdi/*qa'im* was to embark on a universal jihad, and by making this statement, the Báb was tapping into the messianic atmosphere that had a distinct bearing upon his religious mission.

In addition to waging war on his behalf, the Báb also calls on kings to perform a second major task: that of distributing his writings to Turkey, India, and everywhere else: “O concourse of kings! (*yá ma'shar al-mulúk*) Deliver with truth and in all haste the verses sent down by Us, to the peoples of Turkey and of India and beyond them, with power and with truth, to lands in both the East and the West.”<sup>11</sup> In specifying the places of Turkey and India, the Báb could be referring to the two Sunni great empires of the early modern period: the Ottoman and Mughal empires.<sup>12</sup> In the Súrat al-mulk, these two tasks—waging war and distributing his writings—are connected and the Báb orders kings to accomplish both.

In these sections and elsewhere in QA1, then, the Báb's instructions to the kings of the earth can be organized into four separate and specific instructions. Kings must (a) lay aside their dominion, (b) aid the Most Great Remembrance [the Báb], (c)

give aid towards victory with their selves and their swords for the sake of this religion, and (d) Deliver the Báb's verses to the Turks and to India and then to the rest of the east and west.

Bahá'u'lláh also commands the kings of the world to do certain things. Although his "list" is far more extensive than that of the Báb, we may also break these down into four general categories. Kings must: (a) Obey God and detach themselves from worldly things, (b) Fear God, (c) Be just, and (d) Reduce their armaments. The differences between these two lists are quite striking, as are the similarities. Perhaps the most significant is that whereas the Báb asks kings to come to his assistance with their swords, Bahá'u'lláh tells them to reduce their arms. The notion of the prophet waging a holy war and asking the kings of the world to come to his assistance to conquer that world is entirely absent from Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Instead, he states:

*Compose your differences and reduce your armaments, that the burden of your expenditures may be lightened, and that your minds and hearts may be tranquillized. Heal the dissensions that divide you, and ye will no longer be in need of any armaments except what the protection of your cities and territories demandeth. Fear ye God, and take heed not to outstrip the bounds of moderation and be numbered among the extravagant.*<sup>13</sup>

It is in fact significant to note that from the very outset of his mission, from the time of his messianic declaration near Baghdad in 1863, among the central teachings that Bahá'u'lláh announced to his audience was that the propagation of the religion by the sword was now forbidden.<sup>14</sup>

Historical context can explain this difference in emphasis only to a certain degree, since a short 22 yrs separate the two texts. Although the following points are true: (1) by the time the Báb had addressed Muhammad Shah a third time, in a tablet written from Bushihr some time in 1845, he did not bring up the issue of jihad, (2) At least five months prior to writing this letter, partly due to Mulla 'Alí Bastámí's imprisonment, the Báb had cancelled the gathering that his followers expected to take place in Karbala, where he would disclose something of his messianic role and wage that universal holy war, and (3) On 10 Muharram 1261/20 January 1845, the Báb had sent a letter to Mulla Husayn Bushrúí. In this letter, the Báb redirects his followers in the 'Atabat to leave that region and go to Shiraz.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we also know that despite the changes in his

relationship with Muhammad Shah and what he demanded from that king, the Báb never ceased calling for jihad, as seen in a number of later tablets, such as the Persian Seven Proofs and the Persian and Arabic *Bayáns*.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond historical context, the differences in prophetic “mission” or religious purpose perhaps better explains the attitudes of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh to issues such as kingship and holy war. The Báb’s claims and concerns seem to have addressed to a large degree certain messianic expectations within Shi’i Islam and focused on creating the conditions for the coming of a second messianic figure whom he referred to as *man yuzhiruhu alláh* (“He whom God shall make manifest”). Bahá’u’lláh, however, envisioned a rather different future in which he was apparently not so constrained by Shi’i messianic expectations. While there is no doubt that a good proportion of what Bahá’u’lláh said is firmly rooted in Shi’i Islam, he was more able than the Báb to transcend it in fashioning his new global religion, partly because of the Báb.

Perhaps because some scholarship on the Bahá’í religion associates the religion of the Báb with the religion of Bahá’u’lláh, using phrases such as “Bábí-Bahá’í,” the tendency exists to forget how opposite, at times, these two religions were, and what different world views their founders held. ‘Abdu’l Bahá states the following about this:

In the Day of the manifestation of His Holiness the Exalted One (the Báb), the striking of necks (Q: 8:12), the burning of books and treatises (*kutub va awráq*), the destruction of places/sites, and general (universal) killing (*qatl-i ‘ám*) of all except such as believed and were steadfast, were clearly enunciated. However, in this amazing age (*qarn-i badí’*) and exalted era, the foundation of God’s religion and the basis of God’s law is [to show] great mercy and tremendous compassion to all nations, and sincere heartfelt friendship, loyalty, and kindness to all peoples and communities and proclaim the unity of the world of humanity.<sup>17</sup>

## The Obligations of Specific Kings: Muhammad Shah and Sultan Abdul Aziz

### The Súrat al-mulk and Muhammad Shah.

In subsequent verses of the Súrat al-mulk, the Báb

specifically addresses Muhammad Shah, referring to him as the “king of Islam,” and asking for his assistance. Muhammad Shah Qajar (1808-1848) came to power in 1834. He grew up being tutored by a Sufi dervish, Hájjí Mírzá Áqásí, resulting in the king’s largely mystical religious persuasion. He was the third ruler of the Qajar dynasty, and succeeded his grandfather Fath ‘Alí Shah after being nominated successor in 1834. At this time, he went to Tabriz, where he became the governor of Azerbaijan, thereby gaining practical experience in kingship. Upon becoming king, Muhammad Shah placed his teacher Hájjí Mírzá Áqásí in an important ministerial position. He faced many challenges during his rule, both internal and external.<sup>18</sup>

In the Súrat al-mulk, Muhammad Shah’s destiny is quite exalted, the Báb claims, if he comes to his assistance:

O king of Islam (Muhammad Shah r.1834-1848) (lit. “king of the Muslims”, *malik al-muslimún*)! Aid thou, with the truth, after having aided the Book, Him Who is Our Most Great Remembrance (*dhikriná al-akbar*), for God hath, in very truth, destined for thee and for such as circle round thee, on the Day of Judgment [Resurrection] (*yawm al-qiyáma*), a responsible position in His Path. I swear by God O [Muhammad] Shah! [lit. O thou king!] If thou showest enmity unto Him Who is His Remembrance (*dhikr*), God will, on the Day of Resurrection, condemn thee, before the kings, unto hell-fire, and thou shalt not, in very truth, find on that Day any helper except God, the Exalted.<sup>19</sup>

The Báb’s commands to Muhammad Shah here are not at all vague; on the contrary, he lays out quite explicitly what he expects from the king in terms of assistance. The Báb makes certain promises to the king regarding the positive outcomes that would result from his compliance, and at the same time warns him of the consequences of disobedience. Specifically, Muhammad Shah should: (a) not show enmity to the Báb, otherwise he’ll receive hell fire on the day of resurrection before the kings, (b) Purge the sacred land from the people of opposition (*ahl al-radd*), (c) submit to the Báb, (d) subdue the countries, (e) not let his sovereignty deceive him because he will eventually die, and (f) be content with the commandment of God.

Continuing with his request to kings in general, he commands Muhammad Shah to help him by waging a holy war against various regions, starting with Iraq and continuing to other

countries. Muhammad Shah should do this because, the Báb says, the king has been “mercifully invested” with sovereignty, and complying with the Báb’s request will reward him in the next world:

Purge thou, O [Muhammad] Shah, the Sacred Land (*al-arḍ al-muqaddas*) from such as have repudiated the Book (*ahl al-radd*), ere the day whereon the Remembrance of God (*al-dhikr*) cometh, terribly and of a sudden, with His potent Cause (*al-amr al-qawíyy*) by the leave of God, the Most High.”<sup>20</sup>

The Báb then broadens his request to the king, requesting that he subdue “the countries”:

God, verily, hath prescribed to thee [Muhammad Shah] to submit unto Him Who is His Remembrance (*al-dhikr*), and unto His Cause (*al-amr*), and to subdue, with the truth and by His leave, the countries, for in this world thou hast been mercifully invested with sovereignty (*al-mulk*), and wilt, in the next, dwell, nigh unto the Seat of Holiness, with the inmates of the Paradise of His good-pleasure. (*jannat al-ridwán*, lit. Garden of Ridwán).<sup>21</sup>

The Báb ends his address to Muhammad Shah by reminding him of his own limited sovereignty, stating that he will eventually die and that true sovereignty rests in the hands of the “Remembrance”:

Let not thy sovereignty (*al-mulk*) deceive thee, O [Muhammad] Shah, for ‘every soul shall taste of death,’ [Q. 3:182] and this, in very truth, hath been written down as a decree of God.

Be thou content with the commandment of God the True One, inasmuch as sovereignty (*al-mulk*) as recorded in the Mother Book (*umm al-kitáb*) by the hand of God is surely invested in Him Who is the Remembrance (*al-dhikr*).<sup>22</sup>

### The Súrat al-mulúk and Sultan Abdulaziz

The monarch whom Bahá’u’lláh addresses most extensively in his Súrat al-mulúk is Sultan Abdu’l Aziz (r. 1861-1876), the thirty-second sultan to reign over the Ottoman empire where Bahá’u’lláh was exiled at the time he composed the Súrat al-mulúk. The Ottoman empire during this time was faced with challenges from its European provinces, in the form of revolts and insurrections in Bosnia and in Greece, leading to the



intervention of European powers. In general, the borders of the Ottoman empire had shrunk in comparison with earlier centuries, and the empire had entered a period of "transformation." In addition to France, other powers that had influence and designs on the Ottoman empire were Britain and Russia. Sultan Abdul Aziz was the thirty second Ottoman sultan. He was brother to the previous Sultan, Abdul Mecid (r. 1839-1861), whom the Báb had addressed in a Tablet that has been translated by Necati Alkan.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the external challenges that I have already outlined, he continued with the Ottoman program of reforms, known as the *tanzimat*, which included attempts at military, educational, and governmental reforms, largely based on European models.

In those portions of the Súrat al-mulúk intended for the Ottoman Sultan, Bahá'u'lláh comments appear to fall in one of approximately three general categories. The sultan must (1) choose his advisors carefully, (2) fear, listen to, and obey God, and (3) be a good and just king. Bahá'u'lláh of course elaborates quite extensively in each of these categories. Perhaps he states the most about justice. Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the notion of justice in his comments to kings in general and to the Ottoman Sultan in particular. The theme of justice runs throughout his works, including the earlier Arabic Hidden Words, the first entry starting "The most beloved of all things in my sight is justice..."

The idea of a just king goes far back into Iran's pre-Islamic history. It is perhaps best known through the notion of the "circle of justice," elaborated in the medieval Islamic period. In a recent article, Linda Darling succinctly summarizes this circle of justice by quoting the ninth century Sunni Muslim theologian and *adab* (belles letters) writer Ibn Qutayba's *Uyún al-akhbár*:

There can be no government without men,  
No men without money,  
No money without cultivation [or, prosperity],  
And no cultivation [or, prosperity] without justice and  
good administration."<sup>24</sup>

Countless treatises have been written elaborating on this theme, which form a genre of advice literature called "Mirrors for Princes." These texts often appear in the form of a wise man

or sage giving advice to a king. NiŲám al-Mulk's *Siyásatnámah*, for example, outlines the rules for kingly conduct, explaining how the king should treat ambassadors, make kingly appointments, and engage in other official kingly activities.<sup>25</sup> In these models, responsibility for maintaining the circle of justice begins with the king and then continues to the subjects and the army. The Báb, however, in the *QA*, inserts into the circle of justice, the sovereignty of God as mediated through him, the Báb. As representative of the Hidden Imam, he ultimately possesses true sovereignty. Thus, the king's sovereignty does not depend on maintaining an army, but in this instance using that army to come to the Báb's assistance. Otherwise, his sovereignty is subject to removal, at best.

In the Súrat al-mulúk, however, Bahá'u'lláh does not ask the Ottoman sultan to give up his kingship. Rather, he asks the sultan to behave with justice:

*Let My counsel be acceptable to thee, and strive thou to rule with equity among men, that God may exalt thy name and spread abroad the fame of thy justice in all the world. Beware lest thou aggrandize thy ministers at the expense of thy subjects. Fear the sighs of the poor and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight, and be unto them a benignant sovereign. They, verily, are thy treasures on earth.*<sup>26</sup>

In many other places in the Súrat al-mulúk, Bahá'u'lláh encourages the king to take care of the poor in his midst--again echoing one of the Hidden Words--and treat his people with justice.

## The Obligations of Ministers (Viziers)

In addition to Muhammad Shah, the Báb also addresses the king's vizier, Hájjí Mírzá Áqásí, in the Súrat al-mulk. He states,

O Minister of the Shah! (*wazír al-malik*) [Hájjí Mírzá Áqásí c.1783-1848] Fear thou God, besides Whom there is none other God but Him, the Sovereign Truth, the Just, and lay aside thy dominion (*al-mulk*), for We, by the leave of God, the All-Wise, inherit the earth and all who are upon it (cf. Q.19:41), and He shall rightfully be a witness unto thee and unto the Shah [King] (*al-malik*).<sup>27</sup>

Were ye to obey the Remembrance of God (*al-dhikr*) with absolute sincerity, We guarantee, by the leave of God, that

on the Day of Resurrection, a vast dominion (*al-mulkan 'azíman*) shall be yours in His eternal Paradise (*jannat al-'adn*, Garden of Eden).<sup>28</sup>

Here, the Báb's message to Hájjí Mírzá Áqásí is almost exactly the same as his message to Muhammad Shah. Like Muhammad Shah, Áqásí must give up his dominion and obey the Báb. If he does this, he will be granted a vast dominion in God's "eternal paradise." The Báb does not say anything about the relationship between king and vizier.

Bahá'u'lláh, however, has a great deal more to say--more than I have time to go into--about ministers, or viziers, and their relationship to the ruler. He tells ministers of the state, for example, to "keep the precepts of God, and to forsake your own laws and regulations, and to be of them who are guided aright." The specific ministers whom Bahá'u'lláh alludes to in the *Súrat al-mulúk* are the deputies whom he addresses as the *wukalá* include the Ottomans Fu'ad Pasha and Ali Pasha. Bahá'u'lláh strongly admonishes the ministers for their role in his banishment, and then unlike the Báb, who tells Hájjí Mírzá Áqásí to lay aside his dominion because everything belongs to God, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that that he does not wish to rob them of their possessions:

*O concourse of Ministers of State! Do ye believe in your hearts that We have come to divest you of your earthly possessions and vanities? Nay, by the One in Whose hand is My soul! Our intention hath been to make clear that We oppose not the commands of the sovereign, nor are We to be numbered with the rebellious.*

## Conclusions

Although the specifics changed from the era of the Báb's religion to the subsequent Bahá'í era and from the commands of the Báb to the commands of Bahá'u'lláh, kings, neither in general nor specifically, complied. Evidence from the Báb himself suggests that Muhammad Shah never received or read the *QA*. In 1844, Mulla Husayn Bushrúí, the Báb's first major disciple, who, according to Nabil's history, was present in his home when he revealed the *QA*, went to Tehran.<sup>29</sup> During that trip, he apparently attempted to present the king with a copy of the *QA* and a letter that the Báb had written to the king, but the Báb states in a later communication, to be discussed below, that he knew the letters were intercepted and did not reach the king.<sup>30</sup> We do know, however, that he did not comply with the

Báb's requests: he did not wage a holy war on behalf of the Báb, nor did he disseminate his writings or give up his dominion.<sup>31</sup> I have not been able to find any evidence of Sultan 'Abdu'l 'Aziz having received or read the Súrat al-mulúk, let alone having complied with Bahá'u'lláh's admonitions. Rather, he had Bahá'u'lláh ultimately banished to the prison city of Acre. At the end, the sultan was deposed on 30 March 1876 and a few days later, he committed suicide.

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*Author's Note:* I am grateful to Dr. Stephen Lambden for suggesting this interesting topic to me as a possible research topic, and for his valuable assistance throughout the preparation of this paper. I take full responsibility for all errors.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Lambden, "The Messianic Roots of Bábí-Bahá'í Globalism," in *Bahá'í and Globalisation*, ed. Margit Warburg, et. al. (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 31-32. See, for example, the phrase "*yá mash'ar al-mulúk*" in both texts.

<sup>2</sup> See John E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu*, rev. and exp. edition (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Lambden, [www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm](http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm). For scholarship on the QA, see Todd Lawson, "Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Báb," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. A. Rippin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 223-253; Todd Lawson, "The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad, the Báb (1819-1850)," unpublished PhD thesis, McGill University, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> William Chittick, "Two Seventeenth-Century Persian Tracts on Kingship," in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 275.

<sup>6</sup> See Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002), 185-234. Hereafter cited as *Summons*. Of course, the full Arabic text has been available for some time and is available from the World Centre texts website. Bahá'u'lláh, *Alváh-i názilah khiṭáb bi-mulúk va rú'asá-yi 'arΩ* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-i Millí-i Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, 124/1977), 2-152.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Adib Taherzadeh, in his *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, devotes an entire chapter to this work. See Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977), 301-336. More recently, Juan Cole includes an extended discussion of the Súrat al-mulúk in his *Modernity and the Millenium*, placing it in the context of Ottoman constitutionalism. Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millenium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 109-139.

<sup>8</sup> Taherzadeh, 312.

<sup>9</sup> The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, trans. Habib Taherzadeh (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), 41 (hereafter cited as *SWB*).

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- www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm
- <sup>10</sup> www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm
- <sup>11</sup> QA 1: 34-35; www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm
- <sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Professor Todd Lawson for bringing this point to my attention.
- <sup>13</sup> *Summons*, 189.
- <sup>14</sup> For an extended discussion of Bahá'u'lláh's reducing armaments, see Cole, 125-126.
- <sup>15</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 251.
- <sup>16</sup> See Denis MacEoin, "The Bábí Concept of Holy War," *Religion* 12 (1982), 108-109.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Makátib-i ḥaḡrat-i 'Abdu'l Bahá* vol. 2 (Iran: Mu'assasah-i Millí-i Maṭbú'át-i Amrí, 1330/1912), 266.
- <sup>18</sup> For more details, see *EI2*, "Muhammad Shah," from which this brief sketch was drawn.
- <sup>19</sup> SWB, 41-2; www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm
- <sup>20</sup> SWB, 42; www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm The "sacred land" (*al-ard al-muqaddas*) the Báb refers to here must be the 'Atabát region. Although the official translation of this passage includes a parenthetical gloss equating the "sacred land" with Tehran, other evidence from the Báb's writings, including elsewhere in the QA itself, lends weight to the notion that he actually means Iraq. See, for example, SWB, 69.
- <sup>21</sup> SWB, 42; www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm
- <sup>22</sup> SWB, 41; www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-THE%20BÁB/QAYYUM%20AL-ASMA'/Q-ASMA.001.htm
- <sup>23</sup> This translation has not yet been published.
- <sup>24</sup> Linda Darling, " 'Do Justice, Do Justice, for That is Paradise': Middle Eastern advice for Indian Muslim Rulers," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 22 (2002), 3.
- <sup>25</sup> See Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government, or Rules for Kings* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
- <sup>26</sup> *Summons*, 212; *Alvah*, 40-41.
- <sup>27</sup> SWB, 42-43.
- <sup>28</sup> SWB, 43.
- <sup>29</sup> Muhammad Nabíl Zarandí, *The Dawnbreakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932), 55.

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<sup>30</sup> See Denis MacEoin, "The Bábí Concept of Holy War," *Religion* 12 (1982): 105. According to MacEoin, a copy of this letter exists in the INBA collections 4011C pp 332-36 and 5006C pp 367-69. See Denis MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History: a Survey* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 58 and 192. The INBA collections containing this first letter of the Báb were unavailable to me.

<sup>31</sup> It is unclear the degree to which the Báb expected him to do so. In the *QA*, the Báb makes claims in line with various expectations found in the massive heritage of Shi'i Muslim messianic traditions. Numerous Imami messianic hadith informed the religiosity of the Báb's first followers. These individuals were Twelver Shi'is who had certain expectations of the Qá'im, such as his waging of a universal jihad. See MacEoin, "The Bábí Concept of Holy War," 93-129; Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 33-69; Lambden, "The Messianic Roots," 17-34.

# Prophets and Mountains

Moshe Sharon

Every great prophet has his mountain. Moses spoke to God on Mount Sinai. (Exodus, 20:19) Jesus' name is associated with the Mountain of Beatitude overlooking the Sea of Galilee (Matthew, 5:1ff) and with the Mount of Olives from where his ascension is supposed to have taken place (Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:12). Muhammad received his first revelation, and was consecrated to prophecy, in a cave on Mount Hirá' near Mecca. (Ibn Hishám, *Sírat Rasúl Allah*. Cairo, 1955 (1): 235ff) The Báb associated himself with Mákú which he called "the Land on the Mountain;" Bahá'u'lláh's mountain is Mount Carmel ("God's vineyard"). It is also the mountain of Elijah who witnessed the divine presence on Mount Sinai as well.

Mountains are not only lofty, nearer to heaven, so to speak, but the less accessible, and the higher and more rugged they are, the more secluded and more mysterious they seem. It is not a coincidence therefore, that in all cultures mountains, particularly summits, became the dwelling places of the gods. The Greeks chose Mt. Olympus as the residence of their gods, the Jews gathered at Mount Sinai to hear God speaking to them from smoke-engulfed, burning Sinai, and chose Mount Moriah, Zion, in Jerusalem for His temple "the place established for His dwelling." (Cf. Psalms, 132:13) Christian tradition placed the mysterious event of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor and turned this mountain, too, into a Holy Mountain which was sanctified when Jesus ascended it. (Matthew 17:1-3) More than a thousand years before Jesus, Deborah the Prophetess sat under a palm tree on Mount Tabor and judged the Israelites, and from that same mountain she led the army of Israel, together with Barak, to defeat the Canaanite army of Siserah. (Judges 4:4ff)

The worship of the gods and goddesses on the mountains was one of the major issues against which the prophets of Israel fought vehemently. From the many passages in Bible it is clear that the idol worship on the mountains was the commonest and

most popular form of worship. It was no doubt exciting, frivolous and accessible. Isaiah attacking the immorality and inequity of his people using the words of the Lord added: "they have burnt incense upon the mountains and blasphemed Me upon the hills." (Isaiah 65:7) Hoseah, who is probably the most outspoken of all the prophets of Israel leaves no doubt about the nature of this mountain worship. "They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and burn incense upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and elms, because the shadow of them is good; therefore your daughters should commit harlotry, and your spouses shall commit adultery." (Hoseah 4:13)

This alien mountain worship constituted the real danger to the Israel's strict monotheism, and to the uniqueness of Israel as the people of the one God. Therefore, the description of the worship on the mountains is coupled with the emphatic order to the Israelites to destroy it. "Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods upon the high mountains and upon the hills..." (Deuteronomy 12:2)

The mountains of the heathen worshippers were clearly the negation of the Mountain of the Lord and His holy place. In contradistinction to the abundance of the places on the many mountains and hilltops where the worship of the gods of the other nations took place stood the one mountain, onto which only "he who hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully" "shall ascend." (Psalms 24:3-4) This mountain was identified as Mount Moriah and Mount Zion, the same mountain to which Abraham was sent to sacrifice his son Isaac: "Get thee into the land of Moriah - said the Lord - and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of." (Genesis 22:2) This is the mountain, which was later identified with the one on top of which the Temple of Solomon and the subsequent temples were built. This is the Mountain that was chosen by god himself to be the geographical connection between Him and His people: "Thou shall bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell, in the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established." (Exodus 15:17) It is clear that also in the case of the monotheist faith of Israel, God dwells, so to speak on a mountain. The interpreters of the Bibles have gone one step foreword by asserting that this particular verse means that: "the sanctuary below is directed towards the Throne above." (Rashi's (1040-1105 France) commentary of the



verse )

In addition to Mount Zion, Mount Sinai is also identified as the Holy; thus two Mountains are the Holy Mountains. Sinai is the Mountain of the revelation. This is the mountain of the public revelation to Israel and the private revelation to Moses. This is the Mountain of the Lord from which he called his prophet to come to Him. "And Moses went up to the God" (Exodus 19:3) and he heard from Him that "the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people on Mount Sinai. (ibid, 19:11) And as promised "the Mount of Sinai was altogether in a smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire..." On this mountain, the private revelation to the greatest prophets of Israel reaches its highest peak. For on this occasion Moses achieves the most intimate cognition of the divine being he comes as near as possible for a human being to the perfect knowledge of the divine reality. What a tremendous power have these simple words: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend." (Exodus, 33:11) It is not an accident that in later, Islamic tradition Moses is described as *Kalím Alláh* - he who speaks with God. The Biblical description is very clear on this point: these few words emphasize the fact that not in fire and pandemonium came the Lord to meet his prophet and "majordomo" but in a cloud; and there they stood together, the creator and the created, "speaking" to each other.

Next to Moses, only Elijah, the Prophet warrior, had a similar occurrence but not identical. He too stood on Mount Sinai when God Passed By and was part of the immense mystical experience of being in the presence of the Divine Being. Elijah came from Mt. Carmel to Sinai after proving the superiority of the Lord of Israel over his competitor the Ba'al. Hidden in a small crack in the rock he heard the voice of God but he could not experience the Mystery of His reality like Moses to whom God said: Thou shalt see my back, for my face cannot be seen, for no human sees me and remains alive." (The whole episode: Exodus 33:19-22) Elijah experience was different He witnessed on the same mountain the Presence of God: "And behold the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the Earthquake fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice;" in it was the presence of God. Elijah witnessed the raging powers of nature before the stillness of the divine

presence but he was not in the degree of "Thou shall see my back." However unlike Moses Elijah did not die but was taken up to heaven "by a whirlwind." (2 Kings 2:1) In such a way he remains present in this world in all monotheistic traditions and tales.

Mount Zion is not only the dwelling place of the Lord but also the mountain from which he will appear in all His majesty. From Zion adorned with beauty the Lord Shall appear and begin his act of redemption for His people. In this way the Mountain of the Lord becomes the scene of the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy.

Mount Sinai is identified with Moses not with Elijah, whose Mountain is the Carmel. This mountain is coupled in the north of the country with Mount Tabor. Therefore , we see that there are four mountains that gained sanctity in the tradition of Israel: Tabor and Carmel, Sinai and Zion. Many *midrash* traditions are connected with these particular mountains. Most of them deal with the question which of all these mountains deserved that the Divine Presence should be on it or that the future Temple of the Lord should be built on it, or that the Torah should be given on it or that the Divine redemption should be manifested on it. While dealing with these issues the *midrash* emphasizes that prior to their sanctification in Israel at least two of them were the sites of heathen worship.

Thus we read in *Genesis Rabbah*:

When, The Holy Blessed be He, came to give the Torah on Sinai, the mountains started to quarrel with each other, one saying on me the torah will be given and the other saying on me the Torah will be given. Tabor came from Bet Elim and Carmel from Aspamiah. This one says I was called, and the other says, I was called (to come). To which God said: "why leap ye high hills" (Psalms 68:16/17)? On the tops of all of you idolatry was committed except for Sinai on which there was no idolatry and this is the mountain which God chose to sit on for which reason we read (Exodus,19:20): "And god descended on Mount Sinai." (*Genesis Rabbah*, 99)

The neighbours of Israel were very familiar with the close relation between the Mountains and the god of Israel. In one case we are told that the Arameans of Syria blamed their defeated by the Israelites on the hilly territory in which the battle had taken place because the god of Israel, they said, is a

god “of hills; therefore they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.” (1Kings 20:23)

When the kingdom of Israel came under the influence of the cult of the Phoenician God Ba'al and his spouse the Goddess Astarte, Mt. Carmel was one of the main centres of their worship.

The Book of Kings contains one of the most dramatic accounts about the competition that took place on Mount Carmel between Elijah, the lone zealot prophet of the God of Israel, and the multitude of 400 priests of the Ba'al. Elijah, asking the help of God and receiving it in a form of divine fire that came down from heaven, proved the uselessness of the alien gods on that same Mountain which they wanted to claim for themselves. (1Kings, 20:20ff) Local tradition connected his memory with caves on Mount Carmel where he was supposed to have found refuge. The Greeks attributed divinity to the mountain or made it the dwelling place or one of the dwelling places of Zeus. In this case it was the god or Zeus of the Carmel. It is said that Vespasian, received the good tidings that he was to become the Roman Emperor from the chief priest of the god of Carmel.

The two mountains in the north of the Holy Land, Mt. Carmel on one hand and Mt. Tabor on the other, attracted the eye by their special features. They fired the imagination, and it is no accident that they play important part in the Biblical accounts and many traditions. Tabor, ascending from the surrounding plain attracts the eye with its peculiar shape of almost perfect dome, and the evergreen Carmel thrusts itself majestically into the sea like a head of a gazelle. The unusual topographical features of Tabor and Carmel conveyed certainty: Nothing can change their features. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jeremiah uses the example of the two mountains in order to prophecies the certainty of the arrival of the Babylonian King to attack on Egypt: “As I live saith the King, whose name is the Lord of Host, Surely like Tabor amongst the mountains and like Carmel by the sea, so shall he come.” (Jeremiah 46:18)

These four mountains in the Holy Land: Sinai, Zion (Moriah), Tabor and Carmel were combined in many Jewish traditions describing the End of Days and the reestablishment of the Lord's Temple. The four Mountains will be assembled together so that their summits combine to form the foundations of New

## Jerusalem.

The Jewish *Midrash*, influenced no doubt by the evergreen vegetation on the Carmel and the vineyards flourishing on its fertile slopes, emphasizes the meaning of its Hebrew name: "the vineyard of God (*kerem el*)," and in the Jewish Cabbalist literature it is closely related to the mystery of the Divine Presence. The Carmel stood out as a unique topographical and geographical feature. It is green, forested and lofty, overlooking its environs and protruding into the sea. Its ancient sanctity was reinforced by the Biblical references and by the Jewish Midrashic tradition giving it a unique place in the Messianic Times and the divine redemption. Its close connection with the figure of Elijah, and his prophetic activity emphasized this bond between the mountain and the Messianic Advent. In the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Prophet Elijah, who never tasted death, is the herald of the Messiah. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bahá'u'lláh, as the divine Messiah of the age, chose it as Mt. Carmel as his own mountain as well as the resting place of the Báb, whom he presented as his Herald, the modern embodiment of Elijah.

# Prayers and rituals in the Bahá'í Faith: A Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá 'Alí-Akbar fí Arḍi'l-Álif

Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

## Who was Mullá 'Alí-Akbar-i-Ardistání?

The historical information about Mullá 'Alí-Akbar-i-Ardistání that the authors were able to find are scanty. However they are enough to give an understanding of the allusions of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet addressed to him. Mullá 'Alí-Akbar was almost certainly born in Ardistan, a town 2000 meters high, located at the southern foothills of the Karkas mountain chain, adjacent to Dasht-i-Kavir, the central Iranian desert, not far from Káshán and Náyin. This town, not very important to day, in the past used to be a major city on the route of the caravans and it has been described as the birthplace of the Sasanian king of kings, Khusraw I, entitled the Just (531-578 ce) or Anúshírván (of the immortal soul).

In his youth Mullá 'Alí-Akbar lived in Işfáhán, the renowned artistic city in which Avicenna resided and taught in the twelfth century. In Işfáhán he was a pupil of Mulla Şádiq-i-Khurásání (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 77), known as Muqaddas and later entitled by Bahá'u'lláh Ismu'lláhu'l-Aşdaq, one of the four Hands of the Cause appointed posthumously by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials* 5-8). In that town he embraced the Cause of the Báb in 1845 (Manuchehri) together with his master, when Mullá Husayn-i-Buṣhrú'í (1813-1849), the first of the 18 disciples of the Báb, known as Letters of the Living, went there after having been dismissed by the Báb in Shíráz. Immediately after his conversion Mullá 'Alí-Akbar went with Mulla Şádiq to Kirmán and then to Shíráz. In this town Mullá Şádiq and his pupil met Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí Barfurúshí, entitled Quddús (1822-1849), the most illustrious among the Letters of the Living. The three Bábís began to teach the new Faith and to put in practice its precepts. Particularly, Mullá Şádiq carried out the Báb's instruction to modify the adhán, the call to prayer, adding

the words: “I bear witness that He whose name is ‘Alí Qabl-i-Muḥammad [‘Alí preceding Muḥammad, the Báb] is the servant of Baqíyyatu’lláh [the Remnant of God, Bahá’u’lláh]” (Balyuzi, *The Báb* 78). This action horrified the pious Muslims of the town, who were already upset because of the people converted to the new Movement through the efforts of the three Bábís, and aroused their anger against the one who had performed that action and his two friends. The three men were arrested, beaten, their beards were burnt, their noses were pierced, through this incision a cord was passed, and with this halter they were led through the streets of the city. Therefore he and his two companions were “the first to suffer persecution on Persian soil for the sake of the Cause of God” (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 414). Immediately after this punishment, the three men met the Báb in the vicinity of Darvázih Sa’dí (Door of Sa’dí), when He came back to Shíráz from His pilgrimage to Mecca (Muḥammad-‘Alí Faízi). Later on, Mullá Šádiq and Quddús left Shíráz and Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar remained there, hiding himself in ruins outside the town (see Balyuzi, *The Báb* 78n). In those circumstances he addressed a letter to the Báb. In that letter he wrote that he had taught the Cause in three towns, Yazd, Kirmán and Shíráz, asked permission to meet the Báb and a guidance on his behavior. From Shíráz Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar returned to Ardistán where he continued serving the Faith of the Báb, while keeping afar from any dangerous situation (Husaynî 269).

According to Sepehr Manuchehri, an expert of Azalism, “after that event he adopted taqiyyah and never again involved himself at times of danger” (3:3, see also Mazandarani, *Kitáb Zuhur Al-Haqq* 3:103). *Taqiyyah*, sometimes translated as dissimulation, “denotes dispensing with the ordinances of religion in cases of constraint and when there is a possibility of harm” (Strothmann). Its upholders, especially among the Shi’ites, consider it as based on the Qur’an (see 3:28 and 16:106) as well as on *Hadíth* and juridical commentaries. *Taqiyyah* was not abrogated by the Báb, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes in His Tablet known in the West as “Tablet of Purity”:

The Báb, at the outset of His mission, explicitly prohibited tobacco, and the friends one and all abandoned its use. But since those were times when dissimulation was permitted (*zaman-i-taqíyyih búd*, lit.: it was the time of dissimulation), and every individual who abstained from smoking was exposed to harassment, abuse and even death—the friends, in order not to advertise their beliefs, would smoke. (SWAB 147, no. 129, *Muntakhabátí* 144)

Therefore Mullá 'Alí-Akbar cannot be condemned for having adopted *taqiyyah*. Moreover Shaykh Kázim-i-Samandar from Qazvín (1844-1918), one of the so called Bahá'u'lláh's apostles, and the son of Shaykh Muḥammad, entitled Nabíl, a devote follower of the Bab and His visitor in the fortress of Máh-Kú and Chihriq (see Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 3:88), writes that he was his pupil in Tabríz for two years (see Samandar 172, qtd. in Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís* 200). Evidently the Mullá had a good reputation among the Bábis and Bahá'ís. Samandar writes moreover:

After the declaration of the Abhá Beauty, he [Mullá 'Alí-Akbar] became hesitant for a while, sunk in his own thoughts. Even in a Tablet, He [Bahá'u'lláh] commanded me to bear a message to him, this great teacher of mine. But before long the Will of God prevailed, and that sagacious, acute and subtle man, subsequent to deep investigation, came through the test and attained the highest degree of certitude and knowledge, and engaged in glorifying his Lord and teaching His Faith until he passed away. (172, qtd. in Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís* 200).

Mullá 'Alí-Akbar, who lived for a long time after the Bábs' martyrdom (see Ḥusaynī 269), left a number of manuscripts, comprising a collection in three volumes of works by the Bábs, that he copied in 1845. The Hand of the Cause of God Mr. Abu'l-Qásim Faizí (1906-1980), who examined them before they were dispatched to Shoghi Effendi in the Holy Land, writes: "These books were written in black ink, but whenever the many references were made to 'Bahá,' this word always appeared in red. During the very first year of His ministry, the Bábs had instructed His amanuensis to write in this manner in order that those who had no time or patience to read all His Writings would be helped to see this Name" (8).

## The circumstances of the Tablet's revelation

Bahá'u'lláh has seemingly addressed this Tablet to Mullá 'Alí-Akbar in that time when he was "sunk in his own thoughts" (Samandar 172), with the intention of purifying him through His vivifying Word "from the defilement of the superstitious" (T1). This Tablet should thus have been written in the Baghdad period (1853-1863).

Those were difficult years for the Bábis. The Bábs had been shot, all the greatest exponents of His Faith had been martyred, and the one who had been provisionally appointed by the Bábs as

“a figure-head (*marja‘-i-ismíy-i-ahl-i Bayán*, lit. figure-head of the people of the Bayán) pending the manifestation of the Promised One” (GPB 28-9, *Kitáb-i-qarn-i-badí‘* 89), that is, Mírzá Yahyá Núrí (1831-1912), a half-brother of Bahá’u’lláh, was not able to act as the central figure of the community. Bahá’u’lláh writes of this period.

*Upon Our arrival in Iraq We found the Cause of God sunk  
in deep apathy and the breeze of divine revelation stilled.  
Most of the believers were faint and dispirited, nay utterly  
lost and dead.* (TB 131)

During His absence from Baghdad the situation worsened. Shoghi Effendi writes: “Such was the decline in their fortunes that they hardly dared show themselves in public. Kurds and Persians vied with each other, when confronting them in the streets, in heaping abuse upon them, and in vilifying openly the Cause which they professed” (GPB 125). As soon as Bahá’u’lláh came back to Baghdad from His retirement in Kurdistan, He arose to regenerate the Bábí community. This Tablet was probably written in this time and can be numbered among the many exhortations He addressed to the Bábís to renew and readdress their faith.

## **The Tablet to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar as a path towards reunion with the Lord**

Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar, a devote follower of the Báb, who had endured a harsh persecution on His path, is now “immersed in the seas of doubt and passion” (T1) and Bahá’u’lláh wants to purge him “from the defilement of the superstitious” (T1). He “droneth round the Fire” (T2) and his position is so grievous that, as Bahá’u’lláh writes, “the whirlwinds of wrath and the tempests of rage were ready to blow from thy doubts upon all beings. Fear thou God, then beg thou forgiveness seventy times, so that He may forgive thee by His grace” (T6). Despite his errors, Bahá’u’lláh consoles him saying that if he will put his trust in God and will be God-fearing, God will turn that Fire into “a light for... [him], and a mercy upon... [him], and a safety to the worlds” (T2). His doubts depend on the fact that he relies on human beings, who are as fallible as he is, whereas he should rely only on the guidance of the Manifestation of God. This teaching, later codified as “free and independent search after truth,” occupies a central position among Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. As early as in the Seven Valleys He writes: “O My Brother, journey upon these planes in the spirit of search



(*taḥqíq*), not in blind imitation (*taqlíd*) A true wayfarer will not be kept back by the bludgeon of words (*kalamát*), nor debarred by the warning of allusions (*ishárat*)” (SV 24, *Haft Vádí* 116). Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar has thus fallen into error because he did not purify his “heart from all allusions (*ishárat*)... and from the words (*kalamát*) of the people of the Qur’án” (T7). He should rather look “with... [his] inward eyes the proof through which... [his] faith hath been previously confirmed”, he should not “question anyone about this,” and should be content “with what is revealed on the part of... [his] Lord” (T7). In the days of God’s revelation, most religious leaders are “wrapt in the dense veils of the self and are among the heedless. And whosoever questions such people as these is like unto one born blind who questions another born blind” (T7). Bahá’u’lláh writes to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar that He has perceived from him “the flavor of the ancient allusions (*ishárat*) of them to whom the Qur’án was given, allusions about references to the vicegerency (*wiśáyyat*)... wherefore... [he] was saddened” (T9). He adds: “Hast thou not heard that He liveth in the All-Glorious Horizon and hath no need of a vicegerent (*waśí*) after His Revelation?” (T10).

The concepts of vicegerent and vicegerency mentioned in this sentence deserve an explanation. The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* defines the word *waśí* as “a theological term in Shí‘ism variously rendered as legatee, executor, successor or inheritor” and explains that it “was first used to designate ‘Alí as the inheritor of Muhammad’s worldly possessions (such as his books and weapons) and of his political and spiritual authority” and later on to designate “al-Ḥasan and the other *imáms*, all of whom are *awṣiyá’*” (Kohlberg). This concept is very important, because the *waśí* is the One who comes after the Manifestation of God and is invested with the authority of guiding the community in its pursuing the goals set by the Manifestation of God. An incomplete understanding of this concept in the past has given rise throughout the centuries to many divisions in religions born to be instruments of spiritual unity.

In the years when Bahá’u’lláh addressed this Tablet to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar the Bábí community did not know who was the vicegerent/successor (*waśí*) of the Báb, because, as Shoghi Effendi points out, “a successor or vicegerent the Báb never named, an interpreter of His teachings He refrained from appointing” (GPB 28). He had, instead, written in the Persian Bayán: “apparently, since in this cycle neither prophets (*nabí*) nor vicegerents (*waśí*) were mentioned, [these titles] are ascribed to the believers, till the Day of Resurrection when each will call the Tree of Reality as he will like to (*va dar zaváhir chunkíh*

*dhikr-i-nabí va vaší dar ín kuúr ni-mí-gardad, bi-muminín i láq mí-shavad, illá yawm-i-qiýámat kih har-kas rá shajjariy-i-Ḥaqqát bi har ism kih khawhad dhikr mí-kunad*» (6:14). However, Mírzá Yaḥyá, who, as has been said, the Báḅ had simply named “a figure-head pending the manifestation of the Promised One” (GPB 28-9), surreptitiously suggested that he was the successor of the Báḅ. He openly claimed this station only in the Adrianople period (1863-1868), when he began proclaiming to be the “successor of the Báḅ (*vašíy-i-musallam*, lit. indisputable vigerent),” and to pride himself “on his high sounding titles of Mir’atu’l-Azaliyyih (Everlasting Mirror), of Subh-i-Azal (Morning of Eternity), and of Ismu’l-Azal (Name of Eternity) (GPB 114, *Kitáb-i-qarn-i-badí’* 241). Therefore Bahá’u’lláh explained in His “Lawḥ-i-Siráj,” revealed in Adrianople:

In these days the leaders of the Bayán foolishly quote and have quoted, to demonstrate their truth, the same proofs that were quoted by the worst of the people of the Qur’án, for instance, the concept of vice-regency (*vişáyat*), a concept that My previous Manifestation has utterly effaced from the Book, as everyone knows, and beside the Letters and the Mirrors nothing has been revealed by the Pen of the Merciful in the Bayán. (7: 40-1, provisional translation by the authors)

It seems that Bahá’u’lláh intends here to warn Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar against the nefarious influence of Mírzá Yaḥyá and his upholders. Bahá’u’lláh confirms His previous words thus:

*Yeah, God hath mirrors (maráyá) for Himself wherein He may shine to themselves for themselves, if they are placed before the sun and its rays... And they speak of the splendor of the sun, if they are placed before it and if they remain where they were beforehand. When they depart, the light returns unto its source and place, and with the mirrors the veils remain. (T11)*

These words also deserve an explanation. The Báḅ had named a “hierarchy (*marátib-i-rúḥání*, lit. spiritual grades)” of “‘Mirrors’ (*maráyá*)... ‘Guides’ (*adillá*) and ‘Witnesses’ (*shuhadá*),” but all these people “had either been put to the sword, or hounded from their native soil, or bludgeoned into silence” (GPB 89, *Kitáb-i-qarn-i-badí’* 200). Bahá’u’lláh now states that the authority conferred by the Manifestation of God to His hierarchy also depends on their faithfulness. If they turn their back to His guidance, they lose any authority. This

happened to Bahá'u'lláh's son, Muḥammad-'Alí (1853-1937, see Taherzadeh, *Covenant* 125). He had been chosen to succeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the leadership of the Bahá'í community. But since he rebelled against the will of his Father, he lost all his rights, according to Bahá'u'lláh's words: "Should he for a moment pass out from under the shadow of the Cause, he surely shall be brought to naught'." (qtd. in WT 6).

Bahá'u'lláh also explains that the station (*maqám*) of "true believer (*mawqin*)"

*is not specially set aside for anyone at the exception of any other one. By God, the True One, in this Day should all creatures turn themselves towards the lights of the sun that shine above the All-Glorious Horizon with the ornament of God, the Omnipotent, the Exalted, the Mighty, the splendor of the lights of the sun would be reflected in them and none would deny it, except those who are ignorant and far removed and other similar to them. (T11)*

The criterion is very simple: a "true believer" is whoever turns his heart towards the Manifestation of God, "the sun that shine[s] above the All-Glorious Horizon with the ornament of God" (T11), and is able to conform to the following exhortation:

*Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those, although thou ponderest so that thou mayest know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon. (T12)*

This exhortation refers to a Muslim tradition, known as *ḥadīth an-nawáfil* (*nawáfil*, sing. *náfilih*, supererogatory prayer), and also *Ḥadīth at-taqarrub*, that is, of the approaching to God (*taqarrub*), that recites:

Allah's Apostle said, 'Allah said, "I will declare war against him who shows hostility to a pious worshipper of Mine. And the most beloved things with which My slave comes nearer to Me, is what I have enjoined upon him; and My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing Nawafil (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, so I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with

which he walks; and if he asks Me, I will give him, and if he asks My protection (Refuge), I will protect him; (i.e., give him My Refuge) and I do not hesitate to do anything as I hesitate to take the soul of the believer, for he hates death, and I hate to disappoint him.” (al-Bukhārī, *ṣaḥīḥ* 8.76.509; see Furúẓánfar, *Aḥadīth*, no. 148)

This tradition implies that a seeker who strictly adheres to the religious laws will be able to approach to God to the point that he will lose his own qualities and acquire His attributes. This condition opens the eye of the heart, that is the capacity of perceiving spiritual reality, beyond any mental and intellectual category, and opens the way towards higher levels of spiritual progress. In this condition the spiritual seeker is capable of recognizing the Manifestation of God as disguised as he may appear.

## The “Reunion Prayer”

At this point the second part of the Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar fī Arḍi’l-Álif begins, known in the Arab and Persian-speaking worlds as *ṣalāt-i-ḥájat*, the prayer of the needs. This name may have been inspired by the following words at the end of the Tablet:

I swear by the life of Him Whom God shall make manifest, whoever performs this action wholly for the sake of his Lord and rid of all attachment to all else except Him, verily God can satisfy his wants (*hawá’ij*, pl. *ḥájat*) and shall raise him up on the day of resurrection in such wise that the company of the favoured angels will be bewildered. (28)

The Bahá’í scholar ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd Ishráq Khávarí (1902-1972), who quotes this prayer in his celebrated anthology of Bahá’í writings entitled *Má’idiy-i-Āsmání*, summarized these words as follows: “Let him then raise his head, and ask from God whatever he desireth (*Ḥájat-i-khud*)” (7:135). Bahá’u’lláh also adds:

*Verily, We have instructed and warned thee, that thou mayest attain unto the presence (liqá’) of thy Lord and mayest not be deprived of what is better for thee than the treasures of the heavens and the earth. (T28)*

Therefore this prayer may also be considered as a prayer asking God for the greatest bounty: arriving at the presence of, and recognizing His Manifestation in His Day. The meaning of

the “Presence of God,” or reunion with God is explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

whosoever, and in whatever Dispensation, hath recognized and attained unto the presence of these glorious, these resplendent and most excellent Luminaries, hath verily attained unto the “Presence of God (*liqá’u’lláh*)” Himself, and entered the city of eternal and immortal life. (KI 142, m 151, *Kitáb-i-Musta’ab* 111)

Therefore this prayer may be also called *ṣalat-i-Liqá’*, the “Reunion Prayer.” It is an invitation to the mystic nuptials with the Lord, “the Best-Beloved of every understanding heart” (PM 104, no. LXV, m 2).

In this perspective, the instructions comprised in this prayer become reminiscent of such ancient, or even modern, rituals as the vestition of the bride to be presented to her groom in the day of their wedding or the vestition of the priest before his celebration of a rite. First, detaching oneself “from all things” (T13), performing the “ablutions with clear and pure water” (T13), hands and face (T14, 15), perfuming oneself and wearing the best clothes (T17), then turning towards the Qiblih (T17), standing “firm” in one’s “place” (T18), “with manifest poise and dignity” (T18), then raising one’s hands “towards God” (T18) and taking “three paces forward” towards the ideal reunion place (T20, 22, 24), then prostrating oneself before His beauty (T26), and finally silently invoking Him from one’s innermost heart (T28).

Mystical meanings can also be ascribed to the prescriptions contained in this prayer. They may be read as a description of the mystical path leading towards the reunion with the Divine. Detaching oneself “from all things” and performing the ablutions is a clear reference to the purifying connotations of the purgative way. Perfuming oneself and wearing the best clothes is a preparation to the acquisition of virtues, an acquisition that is perfected while invoking God that He may turn the simple acts performed by one’s body into inner attitudes of purification and expression of fragrant virtues, typical of the illuminative way. The illumination is realized in “three paces” (T20), each referring to a different Manifestation of God. The first step refers to Moses, seemingly a symbol of detachment from the world of names and of the capacity of seeing God in each part of creation (T21). The second step refers to Jesus, seemingly a symbol of teaching the Faith, of detachment from the world of Attributes and spiritual

resurrection (T23). The third step refers to all the Prophets and the Chosen Ones (T25), seemingly anticipating the entrance into the Paradise of His Presence, a station in which the Manifestations of God “are all invested with the robe of Prophethood, and honoured with the mantle of glory” (Bahá’u’lláh, KI 152, m 161). Here one comes closer to the apex of the mystical way, the unitive way, followed by a prostration, a physical sign of the recognition of one’s nothingness, in one’s praise of God. At last, the final invocation, asking that one may avoid the risk of not understanding the signs of God:

*I beseech Thee, O my God... not to reckon me among them who heard Thy voice and failed to answer Thy call, or them unto whom Thou hast revealed Thy Being in Thy most exalted manifestation and glorious splendour, and did not obey Thee. (T27)*

This invocation is reminiscent of the fact the one’s spiritual progress on earth is always uncertain:

*How often hath a sinner attained, at the hour of death, to the essence of faith, and, quaffing the immortal draught, hath taken his flight unto the Concourse on high! And how often hath a devout believer, at the hour of his soul’s ascension, been so changed as to fall into the nethermost fire! (KI 194, m 214)*

Therefore this prayer may also be called the “Reunion Prayer,” in remembrance of the following advice by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Beseech thou from God’s infinite grace whatsoever thou desirest. But wert thou to heed my advice thou wouldst desire naught save entrance into the Abhá Kingdom” (in CC 2:231, no. 1741).

## Rituals in the “Reunion Prayer”

In the Bahá’í Faith rites, that is, established, ceremonious, acts codified in the Holy Writings, are very few. The Universal House of Justice explains that

the Faith has certain simple rites prescribed by Bahá’u’lláh, such as the obligatory prayers, the marriage ceremony and the laws for the burial of the dead, but its teachings warn against developing them into a system of uniform and rigid rituals incorporating man-made forms of practices, such as exists in other religions where rituals usually consist of elaborate ceremonial practices performed by a member of the clergy... (on behalf of the Universal House

of Justice, 16 October 1979, in LG 478, no. 1573).

The rites associated with the “Reunion Prayer”, seemingly uncommon in the Bahá’í Writings, are thus an exception in the Bahá’í religious world. These rites are in part similar to those associated with the Obligatory Prayers, with a few differences.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “in every word and movement of the obligatory prayer there are allusions, mysteries and a wisdom that man is unable to comprehend, and letters and scrolls cannot contain” (in CC 2:233, no. 1748). And Shoghi Effendi explains that the “very few and simple” regulations associated with the Obligatory Prayers “are of a great spiritual help to the individual believer, in that they help him to fully concentrate when praying and meditating. Their significance is thus purely spiritual” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 November 1934, in CC 2:237, no. 1759). The spiritual meanings of the physical gestures that a person, spontaneously or conforming to a prescribed rituals, performs during the prayer are also recognized in the Christian world. The hypertext *La formazione permanente “paradigma” della formazione iniziale* (Permanent Training: Paradigm of the Early Training) devotes an entire chapter to “The Body in Prayer.” It writes:

The golden rule of the body’s integration into prayer is... a progressive interiorization of all physical gestures into tranquility and unification, so that the whole person may be absorbed in prayer, all one’s being may become prayer. This unification may lead to a correct use of the physical gestures expressing one’s personal, deep and deeply felt, prayer as an adequate resource for a holistic prayer. One should thus aim at one’s unification in an attitude of utter receptivity and listening, in a prayerful and contemplative silence, implying for the mind and the heart to be unified towards God.

Performing the ablutions, turning towards the Qiblih, standing, raising one’s hands and prostrating are part of the rites of the daily Obligatory Prayers and of the repetition of the Greatest Name 95 times a day. Perfuming oneself, wearing a fine dress and advancing towards the Qiblih are new and typical of this prayer. Also the explicit prescriptions of an attitude of detachment “from all things” (T13) and of “manifest poise and dignity” (T18) are typical of this prayer.

***“perform ablutions with clear and pure water...”*** (T13)

Ablutions as a purification rite are a feature of many

religions. The Bible for example prescribes that the priests “when they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the Lord” (Exodus 30:20, KJB). Another form of ablution among the Jews is the total immersion of one’s body in a pool filled with running water, called *mikvah* or *mikveh*, to become purified from such previous defilements, as for example a menstrual cycle, a childbirth, a nocturnal emission, or coming into contact with the dead or other ritually unclean objects. Christians use ablutions in the baptism rite, supposedly going back to the Pentecost Day (see Facts 2:38), in the rite of the washing of the feet in Maundy Thursday, as a remembrance of what Jesus did in the Last Supper (see John 13:4-5) and, symbolically, in the lavabo rite, when the priest washes his fingers with water while celebrating the Mass. Early Christians used to wash their hands before praying, either during a common rite or individually, in obedience to Paul’s exhortation “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). Muslims use ablutions (*wudú*), hands and face, as a preparation to their Daily Obligatory Prayers.

Bahá’í ablutions consist in washing the hands and the face in preparation for prayer (see KA 182, n34). The water should be pure, that is it should not be changed in colour, taste or smell (see *ibid.* 212, n105). The essential features of Bahá’í ablutions may be found in Shoghi Effendi’s “Synopsis and Codification of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.” The relevant part is reproduced, integrated, in the footnotes, with explanations given in note 34 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas’ text.

- a) Ablutions must precede the recital of the Obligatory Prayers.
- b) For every Obligatory Prayer fresh ablutions must be performed.
- c) Should two Obligatory Prayers be offered at noon one ablution for both prayers is sufficient.
- d) If water is unavailable or its use harmful to the face or hands, the repetition, five times, of a specifically revealed verse is prescribed.
- e) Should the weather be too cold the use of warm water is recommended.
- f) If ablutions have been performed for other purposes, their



renewal prior to the recital of the Obligatory Prayer is not required.

- g) Ablutions are essential whether a bath has been taken previously or not. (KA 36)

**“turn thy face towards the Sanctuary of God [Qiblih, t.n.]” (T17)**

The *Qiblih* (from the Arabic root *qabila*, to turn toward) is “the ‘Point of Adoration’, that is, the point to which the worshipper should turn when offering obligatory prayer” (in KA n34). Turning towards a direction considered as holy while praying is a common feature of many religions. The Jews pray turning towards the *sancta sanctorum* of Jerusalem Temple. Early Christians residing in Europe prayed turned towards East, that is, towards Jerusalem. In the Moslem world, initially the *Qiblih* was Jerusalem, but Muḥammad changed it later to Mecca and the Kaaba Shrine (see Koran 2:142-4).

The Bahá’í *Qiblih* is appointed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in “Questions and Answers”:

*Fear ye the Most Merciful and consider what He hath revealed in another passage. He said: “The Qiblih is indeed He Whom God will make manifest; whenever He moveth, it moveth, until He shall come to rest.” Thus was it set down by the Supreme Ordainer when He desired to make mention of this Most Great Beauty. (KA 68, m 137)*

*ANSWER: Facing in the direction of the Qiblih is a fixed requirement for the recitation of obligatory prayer, but for other prayers and devotions one may follow what the merciful Lord hath revealed in the Qur’án: “Whichever way ye turn, there is the face of God.” (KA 111, D14)*

Shoghi Effendi explains that this orientation is

a physical symbol of an inner reality, just as the plant stretches out to the sunlight—from which it receives life and growth—so we turn our hearts to the Manifestation of God, Bahá’u’lláh, when we pray; and we turn our faces, during this short prayer, to where His dust lies on this earth as a symbol of the inner act. (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 24 June 1949, in CC 2:243, no. 1780)

**“stand firm on your place” (T18)**

People of all religions stand while praying, an attitude

denoting respect in many cultures. Jews stand while reciting the 19 blessings of the most important prayer in their liturgy, *Amidah* (*standing* prayer), and face the *sancta sanctorum* of Jerusalem Temple. Christians usually pray in their knees and with their hands joined. However, Catholics stand up, as a sign of special reverence, while listening to the words of the Bible during the Mass. The hypertext *La formazione permanente* explains that “the attitude of standing up while praying is emphasized in early Christianity as a sign of freedom, of priesthood, of participation to the resurrection of the Lord. Therefore it was forbidden praying on one’s knees in Easter Time.” Muslims stand up at the beginning of each “unity (*rak’ah*)” forming the Daily Obligatory Prayer (*ṣalat*).

In His “Reunion Prayer” Bahá’u’lláh says: “stand firm on your place (*qum mustaqarran*)” (T18) as in the Long Obligatory Prayer prescribes: “let him stand erect (*yaqúma mustaqíman*) and say” (KA 95, Arabic edition 35). The spiritual meaning of this physical gesture in the “Reunion Prayer” may be better understood in the light of Bahá’u’lláh’s own words. For example: “Thou seest Thy handmaiden, O my God, standing (*qámat*) before the habitation of Thy mercy” (*Prayers and Meditation* 147, *Munáját* 101), “Thou seest, O my Lord, Thy suppliant waiting (*qá’íman*) at the door of Thy bounty” (*Prayers and Meditation* 265, *Munáját* 178), “Aid me, O my Lord... to stand (*al-qíyam*) humbly at His door” (*Prayers and Meditation* 209, *Munáját* 142) and “I have stood (*qumtu*) at the door of Thy grace with utter self-effacement and complete abnegation” (*Prayers and Meditation* 55, *Munáját* 43). These words suggest the idea of a vassal presenting himself to his sovereign to both render homage and invoke his grace. Last but not least, Bahá’u’lláh repeatedly quotes Koran 83:6: “‘The Day when mankind shall stand before the Lord of the worlds (*yaqúmu annás li-rabbi’l-‘alamín*)’,” a verse alluding to the eschatological meeting with the Lord on the Day of Judgment, a verse fitting with the concept of this prayer as “Reunion Prayer.”

### **“raise thy hands towards God” (T18)**

The meaning of praying with raised hands as both a request for assistance and an expression of praise is intuitive and thus is a feature of many religions. Psalm 141:2 recites: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” Catholics raise their hands while praying according to the following verse: “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). The hypertext *La formazione*

*permanente* elucidates this gesture as follows:

All religions value the praying language of the hands. Hands raise towards the Lord in a searching (Psalms 62:5) or an offering attitude (Psalms 140:2), raised hands denote the evening sacrifice, open hands signify an attitude of intercession, according to Paul's advice (1 Timothy 2:8). Raised hands also are a sign of sacrificial offering...

...The Odes of Solomon remember the primitive meaning of this gesture: "I extended my hands and hallowed my Lord, For the expansion of my hands is His sign. And my extension is the upright cross. Hallelujah" (nos. 27 and 42).

Muslims raise their hands, upward towards the face, four times during each Daily Obligatory Prayer. Bahá'ís are invited to raise their hands in both their Medium and Long Obligatory Prayer. In the Medium Obligatory Prayer Bahá'u'lláh specifies that palms should be "upward toward the face" (KA 99) in the Muslim way, an instruction that is not repeated anywhere else. All the inner meanings of this gesture are confirmed in Bahá'u'lláh's words. In one of His prayers for the Fast He writes: "And these are my hands, O my Lord, uplifted toward the heaven of Thy favor and tender mercy. Wilt Thou, then, turn away this poor one...?" (in *Importance*, sec. 3, no. IV). Other references to hands raised in a supplicating attitude are: "Thou beholdest how... my hands are stretched out unto the heaven of Thy bestowals" (PM 182-3, no. CIX, m 1) and "Thou seest, O my Lord, how... my hands [are] raised up towards the heaven of Thy bounty and favor" (*Prayers and Meditations* 270, no. CLXXVI, m 9).

***"fall down upon the ground"* (T26)**

Jews and Christians prostrate rarely. Jews call prostration *nefillat appayim*, that means "falling on one's face." They prostrate for example while reciting the liturgical poem known as *Aleynu* (we must) concluding the *musaf* (Additional offering or prayer) in the holy days of *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. In the Catholic liturgy prostration (prone, sometimes with outstretched arms) is used during the imposition of the Holy Orders and during the liturgy of Good Friday. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator. It exalts the greatness of the Lord who made us [Cf. Psalms 95:1-6] and the

almighty power of the Savior who sets us free from evil. Adoration is homage of the spirit to the “King of Glory” [Psalms 24:9-10], respectful silence in the presence of the “ever greater” God. (par. 2628)

The hypertext *La formazione permanente* explains prostration as follows: “Full prostration, prone... is a sign of utter humility before God, of a physical contact with the earth from which we come, of utter surrender in our adoration of God.” Muslim prostration (*sujúd*), used to glorify and praise God, is part of the rites of the Daily Obligatory Prayer at the end of each of its unities (*rak’at*).

The simple rules of Bahá’í prostration are explained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

*God hath granted you leave to prostrate yourselves on any surface that is clean, for We have removed in this regard the limitation that had been laid down in the Book; God, indeed, hath knowledge of that whereof ye know naught.* (KA 22, m 10)

The spiritual meaning of this Bahá’í ritual act seems clear: recognizing one’s nothingness before the Omnipotent Lord. Bahá’u’lláh writes:

*Behold me, then, O my God, fallen prostrate upon the dust before Thee, confessing my powerlessness and Thine omnipotence, my poverty and Thy wealth, mine evanescence and Thine eternity, mine utter abasement and Thine infinite glory.* (PM 90, no. LVIII, m 5)

*...when they beheld the lights of Thy countenance, they set their faces towards Thee, and prostrated themselves before Thy beauty, submissive to Thy greatness and severed from all things besides Thee.* (in *Importance*, sec. 3, no. VI)

### ***“perfume thyself”* (T17)**

Ancient Jews used incense and they had a special altar made “of shittim wood” (Exodus 30:1) to burn incense upon it. Exodus 30:22-29 describes the four “principal spices” that should be used to perfume the oil of the sacred anointment, employed to consecrate the shrine and the priests: “pure myrrh... sweet cinnamon... sweet calamus... cassia.” Whoever took part to divine worship was asked to “give... a sweet savour as frankincense, and flourish as a lily, and send forth a [good] smell” (Sirach 39:14). Christians also burn incense in the course

of several rites. Catholic priests incense the altar at the beginning of the Mass, burn incense at the elevation of the Sacred Host and the chalice after the consecration. Muslims perfume their bodies at the beginning of their pilgrimage to Mecca after having performed the specific ablutions and before they wear the special pilgrim garment. After that they cannot use any perfume. Muslims wear their best clothes and use perfumes whenever they meet a specially respected person. An episode of the Bahá'í history, reminiscent of this use, is described by Shoghi Effendi as follows:

One night, aware that the hour of her [áhirih's] death was at hand, she put on the attire of a bride, and annointed herself with perfume, and, sending for the wife of the Kalantar, she communicated to her the secret of her impending martyrdom, and confided to her her last wishes. Then, closeting herself in her chambers, she awaited, in prayer and meditation, the hour which was to witness her reunion with her Beloved. (GPB 74)

Wearing clean and perfumed dresses is a prescription of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

*God hath enjoined upon you to observe the utmost cleanliness, to the extent of washing what is soiled with dust, let alone with hardened dirt and similar defilement. Fear Him, and be of those who are pure. Should the garb of anyone be visibly sullied, his prayers shall not ascend to God, and the celestial Concurrence will turn away from him. Make use of rose-water, and of pure perfume; this, indeed, is that which God hath loved from the beginning that hath no beginning, in order that there may be diffused from you what your Lord, the Incomparable, the All-Wise, desireth. (KA 47, m 76)*

The meaning of this prescription may be better understood in the light of the following words by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*It is even as a voice wondrously sweet, or a melody played: although sounds are but vibrations in the air which affect the ear's auditory nerve, and these vibrations are but chance phenomena carried along through the air, even so, see how they move the heart. A wondrous melody is wings for the spirit, and maketh the soul to tremble for joy. The purport is that physical cleanliness doth also exert its effect upon the human soul. (SWAB 146, m 129)*

This special rite has also purely spiritual meanings, as may be

deduced from even a superficial search in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. He writes for example: "This is the Day whereon every sweet smelling thing hath derived its fragrance from the smell of My garment—a garment that hath shed its perfume upon the whole of creation" (GWB 29, sec. XIV, m 6). If the word "garment" is interpreted as "the Divine Revelation," the spiritual meaning of the act of perfuming oneself become more clear. Bahá'u'lláh mentions "the smell of the love of Thy Lord" (GWB 283, sec. CXXIX, m 10), "the sweet savors of holiness" (GWB 304, sec. CXXXIX, m 8), "the sweet smelling savor of purity and holiness" (GWB 306, sec. CXLI, m 4). He also raises the following prayer for his beloved ones:

*Empower them also, O my God, to be as the rain that poureth down from the clouds of Thy grace, and as the winds that waft the vernal fragrances of Thy loving-kindness, that through them the soil of the hearts of Thy creatures may be clad with verdure, and may bring forth the things that will shed their fragrance over all Thy dominion, so that every one may perceive the sweet smell of the Robe of Thy Revelation.* (PM 190, no. CXIII, m 2)

Thus perfuming oneself may be a symbol of an inner attitude of spiritual radiance, of living a virtuous life.

The prescription of using perfumes and wearing beautiful clothes is part of the elaborated rituals prescribed for the pilgrimage to the Houses of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad and of the Báb in Shíráz, rituals which are not yet obligatory for the present generations of Bahá'ís. As to the former, Bahá'u'lláh writes: "And when he [the pilgrim] reacheth it, let him put on his best clothes and then perform ablutions as God hath commanded him" (qtd. in MacEoin 155). As to the latter, He writes: "make use of the best of perfumes, then put on the best clothes you are able to afford" (qtd. *ibid.* 155).

***"attire thyself with thy finest raiment"*** (T17)

Wearing special clothes in certain occasions is part of Jewish, Christian and Muslim rituals. Jews wear the *tallit* and the *kippah*. The *tallit*, the prayer shawl, is a rectangular piece of cloth, of various dimensions, usually white, more or less decorated, characterized by special fringes known as *tzitzit* attached to its four corners. The *tallit* is worn by any observant Jewish male above 13 years, who is a "son of the commandment" (*bar mitzvah*), that is, has become obligated to observe the commandments. These fringes are prescribed so that

the people wearing them “ may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them” (Numbers 15:39). The *kippah* is a skullcap traditionally worn by all observant Jewish men in worship places, as a sign that they recognize the superiority of God, that they accept the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), that they identify themselves with the Jewish people. Both the *tallit* and the *kippah* are a sign that one is a Jew. Christian priests wear special paraments when they celebrate any religious function. These vestments are different in the different celebrated rites. Christians wear special clothes when they receive such Sacraments, as Baptism, “First Holy Communion,” Confirmation and Marriage (in the latter case, specially women). Muslim males wear a special garment (*iḥrám*) during the days of their pilgrimage to Mecca. The Muslim pilgrim garment is made of three elements: two clean, white and unhemmed sheets and a pair of sandals. One of the sheets is wrapped around the loins below the breast (*izár*), the other is thrown over the left shoulder (*ridá*). The two sheets are secured by a white belt. The sandals must not cover the ankles. The pilgrim garment *iḥrám* is a symbol of purity, of renunciation to evil and earthly possessions and of the equality of human beings before God.

Some of the symbolical meanings of clothes in the Bahá'í world may be better understood in the light of the following words by Bahá'u'lláh:

*From among all created things He hath singled out for His special favor the pure, the gem-like reality of man, and invested it with a unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory. This twofold distinction conferred upon him hath cleansed away from his heart the rust of every vain desire, and made him worthy of the vesture with which his Creator hath deigned to clothe him. It hath served to rescue his soul from the wretchedness of ignorance.*

*This robe with which the body and soul of man hath been adorned is the very foundation of his well-being and development. Oh, how blessed the day when, aided by the grace and might of the one true God, man will have freed himself from the bondage and corruption of the world and all that is therein, and will have attained unto true and abiding rest beneath the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge!* (GWB 77-8, sec. XXXIV, m 1-2)

The “robe” of human beings is seemingly the body of their

spiritual endowments, here described as their “unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory.” Bahá’u’lláh in His typical use of the metaphorical genitive associates the word “cloth” or similar with various spiritual attributes: the raiment of “fear of God” (GWB 290, sec. CXXXIV, m 3), the “robe of forbearance and justice” (GWB 304, sec. CXXXIX, m 8), “the vesture of forgiveness and bounty” (TB 69), “the robe of righteousness” (TB 59), “the vesture of true wisdom” (TB 166), “the raiment of goodly deeds” (TB 178, KA 46, m 73), “the vesture of high endeavour” (TB 257). Finally, the “metaphor of the fragrant ‘garment’ is frequently used in the Bahá’í Writings to refer to the recognition of the Manifestation of God and His Revelation” (in KA 164, n1). In this vein the Kitáb-i-Íqán says: “God grant that through His gracious and invisible assistance, thou mayest divest thy body and soul of the old garment, and array thyself with the new and imperishable attire” (KI 158, m 168). This condition is explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as follows: “As regards the teachers, they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment. According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth—that is, whereas in the first instance they were born from the womb of the mother, this time they must be born from the womb of the world of nature” (TDP 96). This explanation is perfectly suitable to the “Reunion Prayer.”

***“take three paces forward, turning towards God” (T20)***

Procession is a very common rite in the Christian world. It provides for its participants to move along on a particular course in a devotional attitude. A Jew procession is the circumambulation of the Torah Scrolls (*haqqafa*), typical of the festivals of *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles. In the first six days of the nine days of this festival every day a circuit is made by the worshippers around the Torah Scrolls. The seventh day nine circuits are made, while chanting poetical hymns, comprising an invocation of personal and community salvation from any natural or social danger and from the hostility of the enemies and a remembrance of the greatness of patriarchs and great historical personages. Christian processions comprise priests and faithful, provide for hymns, psalmodes and litanies, the participants sometimes follow a statue or a sacred icon. Processions are done by Catholics in Palm Sundays, falling on the Sunday before Easter, as a remembrance of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem the days before His Passion, and in the festivity of “Corpus Domini,” recurring sixty days after



Easter, when the Church celebrates “Corpus Domini,” the Eucharist, the body—corpus—of Christ in the sacramental sign of bread. Muslims circumambulate the Ka’bah seven times, in a counter-clockwise direction (*tawáf*), during their Pilgrimage. Muslim pilgrims also run seven times back and forth between the two little hills of Safa and Marwa located near the Ka’ba (*say’*). These are the two hills where Hagar ran in search of water for her son Ishmael, a water that then miraculously gushed forth from the fount of Zemzem. Shiites do a procession during the day of ‘*áshúrá*, commemorating the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn which took place on 10 October 680 ce at Karbala.

Taking three steps towards the Qiblih, as prescribed in the “Reunion Prayer,” seems to be a symbol of the gradualness of spiritual growth. Bahá’u’lláh often describes spiritual lovers as pilgrims gradually moving towards the goal of their hearts, the Lord:

*O Son of Love! Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity. Give ear then to that which hath been revealed by the pen of glory.*  
(HW 24, Persian no. 7)

In this vein He mentions people who have directed their steps “to the seat of Thy grace” (PM 118, no. LXXII, m 3), “towards Thy dearly-loved Sanctuary, and Thine adored and hallowed Court” (PM 175, no. CV, m 2), “towards the shores of Thy oneness, confessing Thy singleness, acknowledging Thy unity, and hoping for Thy forgiveness and pardon” (PM 221, no. CXXXIV, m 2), “towards the seat of Thy gracious favors” (PM 206, no. CXXI, m 1), people whom nothing can hinder “from directing... [their] steps towards the paths of Thy pleasure and the ways of Thy Cause” (PM 204, no. CXX, m 3). In this prayer the three steps are seemingly a symbol of the lover’s gradual advancement towards his Beloved One, through his adherence to the Divine commandments.

***“detach thyself from all things”*** (T13)

It is the first prescription by Bahá’u’lláh to Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar and, as a ritual prescription, is typical of the Reunion Prayer. Detachment, its qualities, prerequisites and effects are described at length in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings.

As to its qualities, “the essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord, to enter His

Presence, behold His Countenance, and stand as witness before Him" (TB 155). It is as "waters" flowing "out from the Supreme Pen" (ESW 12); it is a "breath" (ESW 9), which a worshiper will inhale if he were to ponder on whatever of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers he is reciting; and a "well-spring" from which one will "quaff the wine of immortal life" (HW 41-2, Persian, no. 55).

As to its prerequisites, detachment is a "crown" with which Gods adorns "the heads of... [His] loved ones" (TB 57); an "atmosphere," into which whosoever has quaffed "from the fingers of... [His] bounteousness the living waters which have enabled every one that hath partaken of them to rid himself of all attachment to any one save... [God]" and to fix his "gaze upon... [His] loving providence and... manifold gifts" (PM 240, no. CL, m 1) soars; a "light" which enlightens those who are "ablaze with the fire of love and affection" (TB 74) and with which God illumines the people He has attired "with the robe of righteousness" (TB 59); an "ocean" upon whose shores "such valiant souls as have passed beyond the sea of names... [pitch] their tents" (TB 57-8); a "mead," where those who have passed "beyond the narrow retreats of... [their] evil and corrupt desires" and have advanced "into the vast immensity of the realm of God" abide (GWB 241, sec. CXV, m 2); a "Horizon" towards which people whose hearts have been brightened "with the splendors of the light of... [His] knowledge" set their faces (PM 275, no. CLXXVI, m 23). Detachment is as "lofty heights" attained by people who have quaffed "the wine of renunciation" (KI 238, m 267) and traversed "the vale of renunciation" (*Gems* 28, m 38); an "atmosphere" where whosoever has quaffed "from the fingers of... bounteousness the living waters which have enabled [him] to rid himself of all attachment to any one save... [Him]" (PM 240, no. CL, m 1) soars.

As to its effects, detachment is a "breath" (ESW 9), which would make one "have pity upon... [himself] and upon others" (ESW 9); "a breath... which if it were to be breathed full upon the world, all beings would renounce their lives, and sacrifice their souls" (KI 232, m 260). It is as "waters" that will "cleanse" one's soul (*Summons* 74, sec. 1, m 143). It is a "Salsabil" that cleanse the eye of him who drinks it from all veils (KI 74, m 81); "a court," that when one enters it, he "casteth away all signs, allusions, veils, and words, and beholdeth all things with an eye illumined by the effulgent lights which God Himself hath shed upon him... [and] seeth all differences return to a single word and all allusions culminate in a single point" (*Gems* 29, m 39). The blessed beings flying on its "wings" soar "beyond all created things" (KA 39, m 54); wing their flight "towards the loftiest

summits of... creation" (PM 103, no. LXIV, m 2); rise to such heights that "neither the vain imaginations of the learned, nor the multitude of the hosts of the earth... [succeed] in deflecting [them] from His cause"; and attain "the station which, as ordained by God, overshadoweth the entire creation" (GWB 34, sec. XIV, no. 18). Detachment is man's "true and abiding glory" (SLH 47, sec. 1, m 88) and "true adornment" (SLH 61, sec. 1, m 119); a "breeze" that God expects to be "wafted from the meadows of... [human] hearts" (HW 38, Persian, no. 45); and a "path" in which Bahá'u'lláh invites His lovers to demonstrate what their "endeavors... will reveal" (HW 52), after He has revealed his vivifying Word unto them.

No wonder, thus, that detachment is such an important attitude for worshippers. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "whosoever reciteth... [the Obligatory Prayer], even one time, with a detached heart, will find himself wholly severed from the world" (in *Importance* sec. 1, no. VIII). Being detached while praying is also conducive to the greatest possible joy. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*There is a pleasure in offering prayers that transcendeth all other pleasures, and there is a sweetness in chanting and singing the verses of God which is the greatest desire of all the believers, men and women alike. While reciting the Obligatory Prayer, one converseth intimately and shareth secrets with the true Beloved. No pleasure is greater than this, if one proceedeth with a detached soul, with tears overflowing, with a trusting heart and an eager spirit. Every joy is earthly save this one, the sweetness of which is divine. (in *Importance* sec. 2, no. XIII)*

Last but not least, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advises:

*When a man commenceth the recitation of the Obligatory Prayer, he should see himself severed from all created things and regard himself as utter nothingness before the will and purpose of God, in such wise that he seeth naught but Him in the world of being. This is the station of God's well-favored ones and those who are wholly devoted to Him. Should one perform the Obligatory Prayer in this manner, he will be accounted by God and the Concourse on high among those who have truly offered the prayer. (in *Importance* sec. 1, no. IX)*

This sentence seems to explain one of the reasons why detachment is prescribed while praying. It is an attitude conducive to the reunion with God, typical of a person who has

come to the “Valley of Unity” and thus “looketh on all things with the eye of oneness, and seeth the brilliant rays of the divine sun shining from the dawning-point of Essence alike on all created things, and the lights of singleness reflected over all creation” (SV 18). This is also the station, to which Bahá’u’lláh summons Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar just before revealing the Reunion Prayer:

*Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those, although thou ponderest so that thou mayest know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon.*

**“with manifest poise and dignity (*waqár wa sukún*)”**  
(T18)

*Waqár* is an Arabic word, deriving from the root *waqara*, “He, or it was, or became, still or motionless” (Lane, s.v. *waqara*). Wehr ascribes to this root also a connotation of “reverence” (1276). Lane defines *waqár* as “gravity, staidness, steadiness, and calmness” (s.v. *waqara*, *waqár*). Bahá’u’lláh describes “the dignity (*waqár*)” of the “station” of human beings (KA 63, m 123, Arabic edition 117). ”

*Sukún* is an Arabic word, deriving from the root *sakana*, “it was, or became, still, calm, tranquilized, appeased, allayed...” (Lane, s.v. *sakana*). Wehr translates *sukún* as “calm, tranquility, peace” (488). Bahá’u’lláh refers to the Manifestations of God as abiding “upon the throne of peace (*sukún*) and certitude” (KI 53, m 57, *Kitáb-i-Musta’ab* 41) and describes the “resignation (*taslím*) and serenity (*sukún*)” (ESW 75, *Lawḥ-i-Mubárák* 55) of the martyrs of the Faith before their torture-mongers, “the rock-like stability (*sukún*) of... [His] chosen ones” (GWB 341, sec. CLXIII, m 2, *Muntakhabátí* 219), “the patience (*ṣabr*), the calm (*sukún*), the resignation (*taslím*) and contentment” (ESW 74-5, *Lawḥ-i-Mubárák* 55) of the Mázindarání Bábí.

The locution *vaqár va sukún* is used by Bahá’u’lláh while describing the condition of the Bábí and Bahá’í martyrs, that He defines as characterized by “constancy... firmness... steadfastness... certitude... imperturbability (*tamkín*) and... dignity (*vakár va sukún*)” (ESW 87, *Lawḥ-i-Mubárák* 64). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ascribes this attitude to Ustád Báqir and Ustád Aḥmad, two brothers natives of Káshán, that He describes as “tranquil, dignified (*vakár va sukún*), confident, strong in faith,

sheltered by the All-Merciful" (*Memorials* 72, *Tadhkirat* 117), while living as prisoners in 'Akká.

Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh seemingly prescribes to Mullá 'Alí-Akbar an attitude worthy of "the dignity (*vaqár*)" of the station of human beings (KA 63, m 123, Arabic edition 117), a station that requires them to submit "unto such restraints as will protect... [them] from... [their] own ignorance, and guard... [them] against the harm of the mischief-maker" (*ibid.*). In other words Bahá'u'lláh prescribes him to be submitted to the divine Will. At the same time He asks him to adopt the attitude of "serenity," "calm," and "stability," typical of individuals ready to give their lives on His path.

This attitude is also recommend by Bahá'u'lláh for the recitation of the Obligatory Prayer. He writes that the worshipper should "regard himself as utter nothingness before the will and purpose of God, in such wise that he seeth naught but Him in the world of being" (in *Importance*, sec. 1, no. IX). And 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that in this condition the worshipper "holdeth communion with God, seeketh to draw near unto Him, converseth with the true Beloved of one's heart, and attaineth spiritual stations" (in CC 2:232, no. 1744), that is, he has realized that kind of prayer that Western mystics call contemplation.

## The special meaning of the "Reunion Prayer"

Bahá'u'lláh writes at the end of this prayer:

*I swear by the life of Him Whom God shall make manifest, whoever performs this action wholly for the sake of his Lord and rid of all attachment to all else except Him, verily God shall satisfy his wants and shall raise him up on the day of resurrection in such wise that the company of the favoured angels will be bewildered. (T28)*

These words resemble the words of the more famous "Tablet of Aḥmad": "Should one who is in affliction or grief read this Tablet with absolute sincerity, God will dispel his sadness, solve his difficulties and remove his afflictions" (BP 211).

The Bahá'is associate the "Tablet of Aḥmad" with the following words by Shoghi Effendi:

These daily obligatory prayers, together with a few other specific ones, such as the Healing Prayer, the Tablet of Ahmad, have been invested by Bahá'u'lláh with a special

potency and significance, and should therefore be accepted as such and be recited by the believers with unquestioning faith and confidence, that through them they may enter into a much closer communion with God, and identify themselves more fully with His laws and precepts. (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 10 January 1936, qtd. in BP 208)

The “Reunion Prayer” could be one of these prayers “invested by Bahá’u’lláh with a special potency and significance.” Indeed this prayer summarizes the essential prerequisites of prayer explained in the Bahá’í writings.

Bahá’í prayer is in the first place a spiritual obligation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “It behoveth the servant to pray to and seek assistance from God, and to supplicate and implore His aid” (in CC 2:232, no. 1746) and explains:

*Know thou, verily, it is becoming in a weak one to supplicate to the Strong One, and it behooveth a seeker of bounty to beseech the Glorious Bountiful One. When one supplicates to his Lord, turns to Him and seeks bounty from His Ocean, this supplication brings light to his heart, illumination to his sight, life to his soul and exaltation to his being.* (qtd. in Esslemont 93)

As any spiritual obligation imposed on the Bahá’ís, also the obligation to pray should be understood in the light of the following words of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “‘Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty’” (KA 20, m 4). This concept seems implicit in the final words of the “Reunion Prayer”:

*Verily, We have instructed and warned thee, that thou mayest attain unto the presence of thy Lord and mayest not be deprived of what is better for thee than the treasures of the heavens and the earth. If thou doest perform it, it is for thine own sake, and if thou doest neglect it, thy Lord, verily, can well dispense with all creatures.* (28)

Bahá’í prayer also is a remembrance of God (*dhikru’lláh*), a remembrance that “cleanseth all things from defilement” (Bahá’u’lláh, GWB 294, sec. CXXXVI, m 1) and acts as “...a ladder of ascent for the believer” (Bahá’u’lláh, in *Importance*, sec. 1, no. X), “a healing medicine to the souls and a light to the hearts of men” (Bahá’u’lláh, in CC 2:228, no. 1732). In the “Reunion Prayer” He writes:

*Then, detach me, o my God, from this world and from the world to come, cause me to enter the Paradise of Thy presence (liqá') and the Garden [Riḍván] of Thy mighty and luminous glory. O Lord! Blot out from my heart every remembrance (dhikr) except Thine, that I may arise to praise Thy Being between earth and heaven. (25)*

If the worshipper attains to this condition he prays “only for the love of God, not because... [he] fear[s] Him or hell, or hope[s] for bounty or heaven....” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá’, qtd. in Esslemont 95), he is “associating with God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, SWAB 201, no. 172), “is alone with God, converseth with Him, and acquireth bounties... he will obtain the confirmations of the Holy Spirit, and this will entirely obliterate love of self” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. XI). The idea of the communion with God is the central motif of the “Reunion Prayer,” whose recitation Bahá’u’lláh recommends to all those who wish “to attain to the pinnacle of grace and draw nigh unto the most exalted court” (T13).

In this condition the worshipper reaches “the kingdom of mystery, and the worship of the Supreme One.... [comes near] unto His threshold” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. XIII), “day by day... [his] awareness... increase[s], and, through the power of the knowledge of God,... [he rends] asunder the veil of error of the people of doubt” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. XVI). The attainment of awareness is part of the requests advanced in the “Reunion Prayer”: “Cause, moreover, the waters of knowledge to flow out from my mouth, in my recognition of Thy Self, the Merciful, that through it I may produce Thy proof unto such of Thy creatures as trembled on Thy manifest, radiant and undeviating path” (T23).

In this condition “the worshipper is delivered from the fire, and entereth the paradise of God’s good-pleasure” (SWB 77-8). For him now prayer is a need and a joy. In him the following two sentences by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are realized: “If one friend feels love for another, he will wish to say so. Though he knows that the friend is aware that he loves him, he will still wish to say so....” (qtd. in Esslemont 94), and also: “For a lover, there is no greater pleasure than to converse with his beloved, and for a seeker, there is no greater bounty than intimacy with the object of his desire” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Importance*, sec. 2, no. VII). He thus realizes exactly what Bahá’u’lláh suggested at the beginning of the “Reunion Prayer”:

*Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone*

*but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those, although thou ponderest to know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon. (T12)*

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# Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar fí arḍ i’l-álif<sup>1</sup>

trans. Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani

**He is the Ever-Abiding, the All-Knowing, the Omniscient.**

1. O Pen of the Most High! Make mention of him who is immersed in the seas of doubt and passion, that perchance thou mayest purify him through that which floweth from thee and purge him from the defilement of the superstitious.
2. Say: O servant who tarrieth in the land of bewilderment, and droneth round the Fire, say: “In the name of God, the Most Mighty, the Most Holy, the Most Glorious.” Then enter therein, and let the fear of no one dismay thee, put thy trust in God, the Lord of might and power. Verily, He causes it to become a light for thee, and a mercy upon thee, and a safety to the worlds. Beware, beware lest thou fearest the God Who created thee by virtue of His behest, or hast a doubt about the Revealer of the Bayán and what is therein whereby they may recognize Him Who is the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, and God hath quickened all things that they may attain His presence. This is what We have revealed in all the Tablets, if thou art of them that apprehend. All things are in the grasp of His power, all faces submit to His sovereignty and all were created through the potency of His weighty and unerring Command.
3. Hast thou any doubt concerning Him before Whose countenance every luminary bows down (see Koran 12:4), before Whose majesty every man of glory is submissive, before Whose sovereignty every man of light humbles himself, before Whose knowledge every man of learning is ignorant, before Whose door every man of wealth is poor, before the manifestations of Whose might every man of power is abject, before the signs of Whose potency every mighty one is powerless, before Whose holiness every essence

is subjected to limitations, before the evidences of the lights of Whose eternity every man of the eternal realm is extinguished, and before the brilliance of Whose sanctified and luminous Face every man of splendor is eclipsed?

4. Dost thou hesitate in your acceptance of Him on Whom all books have descended, to Whom all Scriptures have been revealed, and through Whom all the most glorious and exalted Names have been created? Dost thou ask the shadow about the sun and its light? Open thine eyes, then behold so that thou mayest find it in its zenith, in its sovereignty, might and grandeur with the lights that have enveloped with their brightness the Concourse on high and the denizens of the oceans of names and all that was and is, couldst thou but perceive it. And should the ophthalmia of vain imaginings prevent thine eyes from beholding the lights of the Beauty of thy Lord, the Exalted, the Most High, heal thou them, in My Name, the Healing, the Sufficing, the Manifest, the Wondrous. Dost thou ask the drop that hath remained in the depths of the darkest abyss about the ocean and its waves and sovereignty? I swear by God, this is an injustice from thyself towards thyself and towards thy Lord, the Mighty, the All-Knowing. Doth it beseem a man that hath eyes to perceive to ask about the sun in the sky after it has shone forth? No, by the Lord of the worlds.
5. Beware, beware, the Decree of thy Lord is not dependent upon the sanction of anything but Him or the acceptance of any creature. Verily, all else besides Him have been created through His command and have been fashioned through His will. And He hath created them as He hath created thee, and there is no difference in this day between thee and all else except thyself, except him whom God hath assisted through His Cause and acquainted with the manifestation of His Self. And verily he is the best among all creatures in the holy and preserved Tablets. Say: Verily He hath been known from eternity through Himself, and not by the testimony of anyone among His servants and their acceptance. He remaineth for eternity as He was, and no one denieth this truth but all contumacious deniers.
6. Therefore, O servant, be fair in thyself. Is God powerful over His Cause or canst thou fix His manifestation in a time of times? If thou recognizeth that He is powerful to exalt His transcendent sovereignty, verily He manifesteth Himself as He wisheth and no one questions what He desireth. And if thou dost imagine that thou art powerful, adduce then thy

proof and be not of the negligent. Beware lest thou deemest the Cause of God subject either to the limitations of thy self or to those of any of His people. Know thou, then, that all else besides Him is powerless to know His Being and the nature of His Manifestation, except they who know Him through a bounty on His part and a mercy from Him. Verily, He is the Most Merciful of the Merciful. The whirlwinds of wrath and the tempests of rage were ready to blow from thy doubts upon all beings. Fear thou God, then beg thou forgiveness seventy times, so that He may forgive thee by His grace. And verily He is the Great Giver, the Bountiful.

7. Purify thine heart from all allusions that are in thee and from the words of the people of the Qur'án. Then, arise towards the atmosphere wherein the lights of the Face of thy Lord, the Merciful, shine forth, that thou mayest perceive thyself independent from whatever thou hast heard and mayest find thyself freed from the worlds. O servant! I swear by God! Verily, in this most great, most mighty Revelation, the testimony of God hath been fulfilled ere the revelation of a single letter of His Verses which the most learned of the learned are powerless to comprehend. After this Revelation, look thou with thine inward eyes upon the proof through which thy faith hath been previously confirmed. Beware lest thou question anyone about this. Content thyself with what is revealed on the part of thy Lord. Verily, He suffices thee above anything else but Him. Say: Praised be God, the King of the Mighty Throne. Often in the time of the Revelation those to whom the people turn for answers (*mas'ul*, lit. questioned persons) are wrapt in the dense veils of the self and are among the heedless. And whosoever questions such people as these is like unto one born blind who questions another born blind. Does this profit him in any way? No, by the Self of the Lord, the Most Exalted, the All-Wise.
8. Beware lest thou art among them that have clung to the hem of their leaders in the time when God came upon the clouds of the Cause in His Name, the Most August, the Most Mighty, and have turned their back upon God in opposition, and therefore the verdict of divine chastisement was pronounced against them and they returned to their abode, and wretched is the abode of them that have repudiated the Truth. Cast the veil of vain imaginings under thy feet. Then ascend towards the resplendent court of Sanctity and Majesty, that thou mayest see all things under the shadow of the Word that was revealed by His Pen, or even better under

the shadow of His Self, the Exalted, the Incomparable.

9. O servant! Verily, We have perceived from thee the odor of the ancient allusions of them to whom the Qur'án was given, allusions about references to the vicegerency and others, wherefore I was saddened and the Manifestations of the Names in their Realms and the Revealers of His attributes in their dominions were grieved. For We have enjoined Our servants in the Bayán to sanctify themselves from all that pertaineth unto them, because all that pertaineth unto them does not make them wholly independent in the Day of Judgment and shuts them out from the presence of God and deprives them of His holy fragrance, as thou thyself didst behold and didst bear witness.
10. Hast thou not heard that He liveth in the All-Glorious Horizon and hath no need of a vicegerent after His Revelation? Say: Far be from the glory of God what I have imagined in my heart and the wrongs I have committed, and I was among the oppressors. And there is no temporal thing with Him that His vicegerent may divide among his heirs. As to His Cause, it is with Him and is not separated from Him. Beware lest thou dost assign to Him any representative, or vicegerent, or reckoner, or counselor, or peer, and be among them that have truly repented. Verily, He is sufficient through Himself to all creation and nothing is independent of Him in the heavens and on earth, if thou art among the mindful.
11. Yea, God hath mirrors for Himself wherein He may shine to themselves for themselves, if they are placed before the sun and its rays. This is what thou beholdest in the outer mirrors, if thou art among the observers. And they speak of the splendor of the sun, if they are placed before it and if they remain where they were beforehand. When they depart, the light returns unto its source and place, and with the mirrors the veils remain. Thus have We explained unto thee that of which thou wert unaware, that thou mayest be among the true believers. And this station is not specially set aside for anyone at the exception of any other one. By God, the True One, in this Day should all creatures turn themselves towards the lights of the sun that shine above the All-Glorious Horizon with the ornament of God, the Omnipotent, the Exalted, the Mighty, the splendor of the lights of the sun would be reflected in them and none would deny it, except those who are ignorant and far removed and others similar to them.

12. Hast thou not heard, O servant, that the Manifestation that became manifest in the year Sixty was the Manifestation of God and brought to a close the Prophethood of Muhammad, the Messenger of God? Verily, God, thy Lord, is sanctified from all mention, and allusion, and proof, and relation, and association. Verily, He has been established throughout eternity upon the Throne of Holiness and sanctified from all created things and it would be unseemly for anyone to assign to Him a vicegerent. Verily, the vicegerent is for those prophets who were created through His word. Say: Blessed be God, the most excellent of creators! Blessed be God, the most excellent of makers! Verily, We have abrogated such names in the Bayán and We have dashed to the ground the idols of fancy, that none should remain shut out as by a veil by them from God, thy Lord and the Lord of thy fathers. Beware lest thou lookest at Me through the eyes of anyone but Me and if thou wishest to know Me, look at Me through My eyes and thou wilt not know Me through anything but those,<sup>2</sup> although thou ponderest so that thou mayest know Me till the end that none among the reckoners can reckon.<sup>3</sup>
13. Whenever thou wishest to attain to the pinnacle of grace and draw nigh unto the most exalted court and desirest that all the good in the heaven of the divine decree may be ordained for thee, on the part of thy Lord, the Most Exalted, the Most Glorious, detach thyself from all things, perform ablutions with clear<sup>4</sup> and pure water, as has been ordained for thee in the Book (*Bayán*)<sup>5</sup> on the part of Him Who is the Sovereign Revealer, the Ancient of Days and, while thou art washing thy hands, say:<sup>6</sup>
14. O Lord! Cleanse me from all save Thee, and prepare me to meet thee (*liqá*) in the day of the manifestation of Thy Beauty and the rise (*qiyámi*) of Thy Self. Sanctify me from whatsoever may shut me out as by a veil from Thy resplendent Beauty. Purify me, moreover, O my God, that I may recognise Thy Self, the Most Exalted, the Omniscient.<sup>7</sup>
15. *And while washing thy face, say:*<sup>8</sup>
16. O Lord! This is my face that I wash with this water, as Thou didst ordain. I beseech Thee, therefore, O my God, by Thy Name from which Thy servants,<sup>9</sup> except the faithful (*muwa'ídún*) among Thy creatures, are shut out as by a veil, to cleanse my face with the waters of Thy mercy, flowing out from the right hand of the throne of Thy Majesty, that it may be purified through Thine hallowed, resplendent and

luminous Face. O Lord! Protect it, through Thy Name, the Most Holy, the Most Exalted, the Most Wondrous, the Most Glorious, that it may have no regard for aught else besides Thee, and may not turn towards them who have disbelieved in the greatest of Thy signs in the day of the manifestation of Thy Self, the Exalted, the Most High. O my God! Withhold not from me the glances of the eye of Thy loving-kindness, and shatter not my hopes in the holy breezes of Thy favour. Verily, Thou art He Who is ready to answer whosoever calleth upon Thee and is nigh unto them that seek Thy presence.<sup>10</sup> Verily, Thou art the Possessor of Great Bounty! O Lord! Illumine my face in the day when faces<sup>11</sup> have turned black and enlighten it with the lights of Thy bountiful Face.

17. *And shouldst thou recite this after ablutions, it would be permissible, and this is a grace on the part of thy Lord, the Omniscient. When thou hast finished, perfume thyself, then attire thyself with thy finest raiment, turn thy face towards the Sanctuary of God (the Qiblih), round which at this moment the spirits of every existence, whether seen or unseen, and those who were not enjoined to prostrate themselves before Adam and who have been and will always be turned towards the countenance of thy Lord, the Most Exalted, the Mighty, the Most High circle.*
18. *Then, stand firm in your place, raise thy hands<sup>12</sup> towards God with manifest poise and dignity and say:<sup>13</sup>*
19. O Lord! I ask Thee by Thy Name, whereby Thou didst shine forth upon all beings and didst transcend the entire creation, that even as I have anointed myself with this perfume, so Thou mayest imbue me with the fragrances of the holy paradise<sup>14</sup> of Thy mercy and with the breezes wafting the savours of the raiment of Thy Self, the Almighty, the Luminous, so that none<sup>15</sup> may inhale from me but the pure scent of Thy Grace and Favour, and I may be wholly turned towards Thee and detached from all save Thee. Verily, potent art Thou to do as Thou wilt, and Thou art, in truth, the Bestower, the Pitiful. O Lord! My Beloved,<sup>16</sup> my Hope, the Possessor of my being and my soul! Send down, at this moment, upon Thy servant that which beseemeth the sovereignty of Thy generosity and bounty and is worthy of the wonders of Thy grace and celestial glory.<sup>17</sup> Deprive me not, O my God, of the things Thou hast ordained, in the heaven of Thy will and the clouds<sup>18</sup> of Thy purpose, for Thy chosen ones, whom Thou hast singled out for Thine own Self, the Almighty, the Beauteous. O Lord! I am poor, and I cling



to the cord of Thy wealth;<sup>19</sup> I am lowly, and I hold fast to the rope of Thy might and majesty; I am weak, and I have drawn nigh unto the Pavillions of Thy transcendent power and unto the glorified Tabernacle of the glory of Thy dominion and sovereignty. Therefore, O my God, I am standing before Thee, longing for Thy grace, forgetful of anyone except Thee, fleeing from all else save Thee, turning towards the sanctuary of Thy presence and the goal of Thy good-pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Is there anyone save Thee to whom<sup>21</sup> I may turn? Or any manifestation, except Thine Own,<sup>22</sup> that I may approach? No, by Thy Beauty. All that is manifest is as nothing when compared with the revelations of the holy lights of Thy greatness. and all that is exalted sinks into oblivion when brought before the manifestations of Thy glorious highness and loftiness. Send down, then, O my God, upon Thy servant that which shall so enrich him as to dispense with all the things which have been created in the heavens and on the earth. Verily, Thou art the Most Merciful of the Merciful.

20. *Then, take three paces forward, turning towards God, and while taking the first pace say:*<sup>23</sup>

21. O Lord! Reveal unto me, in this station,<sup>24</sup> that which Thou didst reveal unto the Speaker (Moses) upon the Paran of Thy love, and the Horeb of Thy benevolence, and on the Sinai of Thine glorious and most exalted might and mercy! Detach me, moreover, O my God, from the Names and their kingdoms, lest I be shut out as by a veil, through them, from Him Who created them by a command from Him. Thy might, in truth, is equal to all things over all things. O my God! Cause me to hear, moreover, Thy call from every tree, as Thou didst cause Thy servant,<sup>25</sup> whom Thou hast chosen and sent to the worlds, to hearken to Thy call from the Lote-Tree of Thy Cause.

22. *Then take a second pace, stop and say:*<sup>26</sup>

23. O Lord! Shine forth upon me,<sup>27</sup> in this station, as Thou didst shine forth upon the Spirit (Jesus), that I may arise to praise Thy Self and to proclaim Thy verses among Thy heedless servants, perchance thereby their hearts may be cleansed<sup>28</sup> from all doubts and uncertainty regarding Thy Cause, at which all, except a few, of them that dwell in the kingdoms of names<sup>29</sup> swooned away.<sup>30</sup> O Lord! Sanctify me, in this station,<sup>31</sup> from the attributes and their kingdom, that have come<sup>32</sup> between me and the sight of the splendour of the

divine Essence. Give me to drink, moreover, O my God, of the cup of immortality from the hands of the remembrance of the Name of my Lord, the Exalted, the Most High,<sup>33</sup> once more.<sup>34</sup> Verily, Thou<sup>35</sup> art the Lord of immeasurable Grace. O Lord! Give me to drink from the stream of everlasting life, that I may be set afire by the heat of Thy love, in such wise that Thy servants may be inflamed thereof. Cause, moreover, the waters (*salsabíl*) of knowledge to flow out from my mouth, in my recognition of Thy Self, the Merciful, that through it I may produce Thy proof unto such of Thy creatures as trembled on Thy manifest, radiant and undeviating path.

24. *Then,<sup>36</sup> take a third pace forward, stop and say:<sup>37</sup>*

25. O Lord! Shine forth upon me,<sup>38</sup> in this station, as Thou didst shine forth upon all Thy Prophets and Chosen Ones as have drawn nigh unto Thee. Then, detach me, O my God, from this world and from the world to come, cause me to enter the Paradise of Thy presence and<sup>39</sup> the Garden of Thy mighty and luminous glory.<sup>40</sup> O Lord! Blot out from my heart every remembrance except Thine,<sup>41</sup> that I may arise to praise Thy Being<sup>42</sup> between earth and heaven. O Lord! Forgive my mighty sins, my grievous trespasses, all that in which I have failed in my duty towards my Lord, the Exalted, the Most High and my hesitation upon the path<sup>43</sup> that hath encompassed the worlds. O Lord! Attire me with the raiment of forgiveness and the robe of certitude. Verily, Thou art He Who supplieth the needs of those who seek Him.

26. *Then fall down<sup>44</sup> upon the ground and say:<sup>45</sup>*

27. Praise be to Thee, O my God, for the wonders of Thy bounties and the revelations of Thy benevolence towards me, inasmuch as Thou taught me the ways of Thy knowledge and<sup>46</sup> the paths of Thy guidance! I beseech Thee, O my God, by the light of Thy face, through which all beings have been enlightened and the entire creation hath been illumined, not to reckon me among them who heard Thy voice and failed to answer Thy call, or them unto whom Thou hast revealed Thy Being in Thy most exalted manifestation and glorious splendour, and did not obey Thee. Then, establish me upon a seat of glory nigh unto Thy Name, the Merciful, in the garden Thou hast created in the midmost heart of Paradise and join me with such of Thy servants as have drawn nigh unto Thee. Send down upon me,<sup>47</sup> then, every good thing that is in Thy knowledge, and cause me to be raised up on the Day

of Resurrection in the presence of the Manifestation of Thy Self, the Inaccessible, the Most Exalted, the Powerful.<sup>48</sup>

28. Then lift up thy face from the ground, for thou hast completed that which has been prescribed unto thee in this lucid Tablet. I swear by the life of Him Whom God shall make manifest, whoever performs this action wholly for the sake of his Lord and rid of all attachment to all else except Him, verily God can satisfy his wants and shall raise him up on the day of resurrection in such wise that the company of the favoured angels will be bewildered.<sup>49</sup> Verily, We have instructed and warned thee, that thou mayest attain unto the presence of thy Lord and mayest not<sup>50</sup> be deprived of what is better for thee than the treasures of the heavens and the earth. If thou dost perform it, it is for thine own sake, and if thou dost neglect it, thy Lord, verily, can well dispense with all creatures.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This provisional translation by Julio Savi and Faezeh Mardani Mazzoli refers to the Arabic text of "Tablet to Jináb-i-Mullá 'Alí-Akbar fí ardí'l-álif," received by the authors from the Bahá'í World Centre. The Tablet was attached to the following letter:

Dear Bahá'í Friends, Your email letter of 24 July 2006 requesting the full original-language text of a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, including a prayer to be recited in time of need, published in part in "Má'idíy-i-Ásmání" (□ihrán: Mu'assisiy-i-Ma□bu'át-i-Amrí, 129 BE), volume 7, pages 131-135 and "Amr va Khalq" (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1986), volume 4, pages 74-79, was referred to the Research Department for study. A partial provisional translation into English has been published in "Rituals in Babism and Bahá'ism" (London: British Academic Press, 1994), pages 115-118. However, we enclose a copy of the full text of the Tablet in its original language. With loving Bahá'í greetings. (The Department of the Secretariat, 10 December 2006, to Dr. Faezeh Mardani and Dr. Julio Savi)

*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* and *Amr u Khalq* are two commented collections of Tablets by Bahá'u'lláh edited by 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq Khavári (1902-1972) and Mirzá Asadu'lláh Fá□il-i-Mázandarání (1880c.-1957) respectively. The authors have also consulted a text of this prayer handwritten by Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, sent by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran on 11 Kalimát 133 BE [23 July 1976], through a photocopy dispatched by Mr. Yahyá Haydarí to Mr. Ibrahim Takallú, on 6 Mihr 2536 [28 September 1977] (from now on "Iran edition").

<sup>2</sup> See "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth ...." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 22, see also *Hidden Words*, 14, Ar. no. 44).

<sup>3</sup> At this point the so called "shalát-i-Hájat" begins. *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* introduces it with the following words: "A prayer revealed by the Supreme Pen to realize important legitimate needs (*surat-i-shalatí kih baráy-i-barávardih shudanih hájât-i-mashrú'iy-i-muhimmi az qalam-i-A'la*

*názil dhudih ast*)” (131). *Amr u Khalq* calls this prayer “*ṣalát-i-hájat*” and presents it, in a chapter entitled “Prayers (*dar ‘ibádát*)” with these words: “And the Most High has said in a Tablet (*va níz dar lawhí ast qawlahu al-‘Alá*)” (74). The Iran edition is introduced by the following note handwritten by Mr. Yaḥyá Haydarí:

Mr. Ishráq Khávarí in *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání*, vol. 2, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 133, vol. 7, p. 131, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., calls the quoted prayer “*ṣalát-i-Hájat*,” that is Prayer in time of needs. The Universal House of Justice writes in a letter written on its behalf, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Iran, on 11 Kalimát 133 BE [23 July 1976], to which a photocopy of the Blessed Tablet revealed in honor of Mullá ‘Alí-Akbar Ardistání, handwritten by Zaynu’l-Muqarrabín, is attached: “It must be explained that the prayer, which sometimes has been called ‘*ṣalát-i-hájat*,’ that is Prayer in time of needs, is part of a longer Tablet. This Tablet has not been called ‘*ṣalát-i-Hájat*’ by the Supreme Pen” (Yaḥyá Haydarí, 17 Murdád 2536 [8 August 1977]).

<sup>4</sup> “clear (*ṣáfi*),” *Amr u Khalq* writes *ṣáfi<sup>in</sup>* (74).

<sup>5</sup> See “Quand vous voulez faire vos ablutions, asseyez-vous suivant la forme de l’Unité (accroupissez-vous) et parfumez-vous avec des eaux parfumées. / Le fruit de cet ordre est, que, au jour du jugement vous arriviez avec de bonnes odeurs auprès du soleil de la Vérité” (The Bab, *Le Báyân Arabe* 8:10, p. 174. “L’eau est pure par elle-même et purifie par elle-même les autres objets quand elle n’a pas changé ses trois qualités: couleur, odeur, goût” (The Bab, Sayyid ‘Alí Muhammad, *Le Báyân Persan* 6:2, III, p. 74).

<sup>6</sup> The Iran edition and *Amr u Khalq* write this prescription in Persian: “While washing his hands, let him say (*Dar hingám-i-shustán-i-dast bi-gúyad*)” (2, 231).

<sup>7</sup> “the Omniscient (*‘Alím*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “the Mighty (*‘Azím*)” (74).

<sup>8</sup> The Iran edition and *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* write this prescription in Persian: “And while washing his face, let him say (*Dar Ḥayn-i-shustan-i-ṣúrat bi-gúyad*)” (2, 131).

<sup>9</sup> “Thy servants (*‘ibádu*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “most of Thy servants (*‘anhu áktharu’l-‘ibádu*)” (74).

<sup>10</sup> *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* writes *mujíb<sup>an</sup> ... qaríb<sup>an</sup>* (132) instead of *mujíb<sup>un</sup> ... qaríb<sup>un</sup>*.

<sup>11</sup> “faces (*wujúhu*).” *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* writes “existence (*wujúd*)” (132).

<sup>12</sup> “thy hands (*yadayk*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *yadák* (75).

<sup>13</sup> The Iran edition and *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* summarize paragraphs 17 and 18 in Persian as follows: “Then let him perfume himself, and stand up, and facing the Qiblih, let him raise his hands towards the threshold of God, and say (*Pas az án khud-rá mu‘aṭṭar namayad va rúy bi qiblih bi-ístad va hard u dast bi dargáh-i-khudá buland kunad va bi-gúyad*)” (3, 132).

<sup>14</sup> “the fragrances of the holy paradise (*nafaḥati riḍvání qudsi*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “the holy fragrances (*nafaḥati qudsi*)” (75).

<sup>15</sup> “none (*aḥad<sup>un</sup>*).” *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* does not write the word *aḥad<sup>un</sup>* (132).

<sup>16</sup> The Iran edition adds at this point “my Desire (*wa Maqṣúdí*)” (4)

<sup>17</sup> “[Thy] celestial glory (*imtináni-ka*).” *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* writes “Thy restraint (*imtiná’i-ka*)” (132).

- <sup>18</sup> “clouds (*saḥābi*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes “atmosphere (*hawá'*)” (132).
- <sup>19</sup> “Thy wealth (*ghaná'i-ka*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes “Thy tender mercy (*ináyata-ka*)” (133).
- <sup>20</sup> “Thy good-pleasure (*riḏá'a-ka*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *riḏá'i-ka* (76).
- <sup>21</sup> “to whom (*ilayhi*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *ilay-ka* (76), which seems a mistake in transcription.
- <sup>22</sup> “except Thine Own (*li-siwá-ka*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes *li-siwá'i-ka* (133).
- <sup>23</sup> The Iran edition and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* write: “Then, let him put down his hands, take one pace forward in the direction of the Qiblih, stop, and say (*dast-háy-i-khud-rá bi-zír ávardih va yik qadam bi-samt-i-qiblih pish ravad bi-ístad va bi-gúyad*)” (5, 133).
- <sup>24</sup> “*hadha'l- maqámi*.” *Amr u Khalq*, the Iran edition and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* add *fí* (77, 5, 133). In the text received from the Bahá'í World Centre the preposition *fí*, in, is not written (a typo?). The word *maqam* has connotations of both “place” and “station.”
- <sup>25</sup> “Thy servant (*abdaka*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “[this] servant (*abda*)” (77).
- <sup>26</sup> The Iran edition and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* write in Persian: “Then, let him take another pace, and say (*yik qadam pishtar bi-ravad va bi-gúyad*)” (6, 133).
- <sup>27</sup> “upon me (*'allí*).” *Amr u Khalq* does not write “unto me (*'allí*)” (77).
- <sup>28</sup> “may be cleansed (*yutahharu*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *tatahhara* (77), feminine passive, imperfect, conjunctive form of the verb *tahara*, whose masculine form is *yutahharu*.
- <sup>29</sup> “in the kingdoms of names (*fí jabarúta'l-'asmá'i*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes: “in the heaven and in the earth (*fí's-samawát wa'l-araşayn*)” (134).
- <sup>30</sup> “swooned away (*inşa'aqa*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *inşa'aqat* (77).
- <sup>31</sup> “in this station (*fí dhalika'l-maqámi*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes *fí fi'lika'l-maqám* (a typo?) (134).
- <sup>32</sup> “have come (*yakúnu*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *takúnu* (77), feminine imperfect, indicative form of the verb *kaná*, whose masculine form is *yakúnu*.
- <sup>33</sup> “my Lord, the Exalted, the Most High (*Rabbí al-'Alíyi'l-'Alá*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “my Lord, the Most High (*Rabbí al-A'lá*)” (77).
- <sup>34</sup> “once more (*fí hadha'l-karrati'l-ukhrá*).” This locution may also be translated as “in this second cycle.” An allusion to the Bahá'í vs the Babí Dispensation?
- <sup>35</sup> “Thou (*anta*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* does not write *anta* (134).
- <sup>36</sup> “Then (*thumma*).” *Amr u Khalq* does not write *thumma* (77).
- <sup>37</sup> The Iran edition and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* write in Persian: “Then, let him take a third pace towards the Qiblih, and say (*qadami siyyum rá bardáshtih pishtar bi-ravad bi-ístad va bi-gúyad*)” (7, 134).
- <sup>38</sup> “upon me (*'allí*).” The Iran edition and *Amr u Khalq* do not write the locution “upon me (*'allí*)” (7, 78).
- <sup>39</sup> The Iran edition and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* repeat the preposition “in (*fí*)” (7, 134).
- <sup>40</sup> “Thy mighty and luminous glory (*bahá'i-ka'l-'azízi'l-muníri*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “Thy utterance (*bayán'ika*)” (78).

- <sup>41</sup> “except Thine [mention] (*dúna dhikrika*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* does not write the locution “except Thine [mention] (*dúna dhikrika*)” (134).
- <sup>42</sup> “to praise Thy Being (*bi thaná'i nafsi-ka*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes “to praise Thee (*'alá thaná'ika*)” (134).
- <sup>43</sup> “the path (*siráti*).” *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* and *Amr u Khalq* write “His path (*sirátihí*)” (134, 78)
- <sup>44</sup> “fall down (*akhrur*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *akharra* (78), the perfect indicative form of *kharra*, whereas *akhrur* is the imperative form, 2<sup>nd</sup> person, masculine.
- <sup>45</sup> The Iran edition and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* write: “Let him then bow his forehead to the ground and say (*bi-sijdiḥ bi-ravad va dar sijdiḥ bi-gúyad*)” (8, 135)
- <sup>46</sup> “and (*wa*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes “on (*fí*)” (78).
- <sup>47</sup> “Send down upon me (*anzil 'allí*)” (9). The Iran Edition does not write the locution “to me (*'allí*),” and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* writes “nourish me (*arziqní*)” (135).
- <sup>48</sup> At this point *Amr u Khalq* and *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* insert the locution “the end (*intihá*)” (78, 135).
- <sup>49</sup> The Iran edition writes: “*dar ín hingám bardár šúratat rá az khák, zirá tu anjám dádiḥ-i 'amalí rá kih amr shudí bidán dar ín lawḥ-i-mubín. Sawgand bi-ján-i-man yazharuhu'lláh kasí-kih anjám dahad ín 'amal rá khálišan li-vajha'lláh va munkqati'an 'an dúnihú, bi-taḥqíq bar avarad ḥaváhiḡ-ash rá va bar míangízad úrá rúz-i-rastkhíz bi-zívarí kih mutiḤayyir shavand az 'an malá'ikiy-i-muqarrabín*” (9) that is a Persian translation of the Arabic text.
- <sup>50</sup> “mayest not (*lá takúna*).” *Amr u Khalq* writes *lá takúnanna* (79).
- <sup>51</sup> The Iran edition writes: “*chinín ta'lim dádím bi-tu va yád-kardím tu-rá sháyad dark kuní liqá'i parvardigárat rá va mabáshí maḥrúm az ánchih bihtar ast baráy-i-tu az án-chi dar zamínhá va ásimánhá ast. Agar anjám dahí baráy-i-khudat hast, va agar tark kuní parvardigárat bínýáz ast az 'álamyán*” (9) that is a Persian translation of the Arabic text. *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* abridges paragraph 28 as follows: “Let him then raise his head, and ask from God whatever he desireth (*Pas az án sar az sujdih bardárad va Ḥá jat-i-khud-rá az khudá vand bikhwahad*)” (135).

# The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice\*

Ian Semple

When, earlier today, I was recalling these past years, it occurred to me how much the British Bahá'í Community has grown in that short time. When I left in 1961 I recollect there were about eight hundred Bahá'ís in the whole British Isles, and they were already not only operating twenty five Local Spiritual Assemblies, but directing the work in east and west Africa, and starting to think about the Pacific, and all sorts of things. At that time they were in fact about the size of a normal local congregation of a Non-Conformist Church, but the Faith obviously had much greater strength – as you see by the range of activities that they were undertaking. Now just see the size of the meeting here and think of all the other friends in the British Isles. It is a tremendous advance.

What I have been asked to talk about tonight is the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, which, in a sense, is a brief outline of part of the history of the Faith. I think history is vital for us to know and to understand but we should also see ourselves as part of it. We cannot divide life rigidly into the past, present and future. Academically, perhaps, one has to. I remember when I was at university one of my friends wanted to study the history of the First World War, but he was told by his professor of history that he could not do that, it just wasn't history; it was current affairs.

Of course, really, current affairs is just a continuation of history. This was brought home to me in 1962, when we were at Bahjí commemorating the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh. In those days we would go out there in the evening and have a meal together, and then we would spend the evening either dozing or walking around or sitting, talking, and then we would probably go to sleep for a while and, finally, in the morning hours gather for the commemoration of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh. Well, that particular night, while we were sitting around the table

where we had been eating, the Hand of the Cause Mr Samandarí, who was there with us, told us <sup>1</sup>how moved he was to be there on that evening because it was the first time he had been in Bahjí on the night of the Ascension since it took place. And we realised he had been a pilgrim when Bahá'u'lláh ascended and had been in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. And here he was sitting with us. That's how short Bahá'í history is. This is just the year 162 – we are in the middle of the second century. We are not, in Bahá'í terms, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; we are in the second century. We are in the springtime of the world.

We remember this every Ridván when we think of the declaration of Bahá'u'lláh. It also makes you think of the relative youth of the Faith as you look at the developments that have taken place in recent decades. We were recalling today the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the United Kingdom. I do not think there are any Bahá'is left here now that remember that visit but there were when I first became a Bahá'í. It was when Shoghi Effendi was here in London that he learnt of the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and had to return to the Holy Land. He was a very young man. A lot of the Bahá'is now are youth; just think what it meant to a young man of twenty four to suddenly find himself in the position of the Guardian of the Cause of God, appointed by his beloved grandfather 'Abdul-Bahá. It was a shattering experience for Shoghi Effendi. Think of yourself ... what would you do if you suddenly were told "Look! Here is the Cause of God for a thousand years. Look after it. Be the Guardian of this Cause, protect it, teach it, build it." That's what Shoghi Effendi faced. And he faced doing it with both tremendous positive assets and tremendous liabilities.

Positively there were many, many deeply devoted Bahá'is around the world who rallied to him, who turned to him as 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said, who just longed to do what he wanted; to do what he showed them for the advancement of this Cause. It wasn't that they were starting from scratch – 'Abdu'l-Bahá had already been educating them. You had people like Martha Root who went around the world. Read the letters between Martha Root and Shoghi Effendi and see the profound love that existed between them. One must remember how small the Bahá'í world was in those days when Shoghi Effendi became the Guardian. There was a very lovely relationship of profound friendship that existed among true Bahá'is in those days.

They were nevertheless human beings and they had their struggles. I remember Hasan Balyuzi telling me about the early community in England. He said that they were real, strong



characters. They had to try to be Bahá'ís in those days. It wasn't easy for someone like Lady Blomfield to be a Bahá'í. They loved one another, they would fight like cat and dog in a meeting, and then go their ways, and then they had to come together again. They had their strong ideas, and they had only just begun to learn about the Faith. They hadn't any of the letters of the Guardian on which we so ardently rely - he had only just become Guardian. They were strong characters, but they fought for the Cause, they loved the Cause and they clung together. And this unity among the friends, the love among the friends, and the idealism of the friends, their willingness to go out and sacrifice themselves was what enabled the Guardian to build so much.

But we shouldn't think it was easy for Shoghi Effendi. He was faced with the most tremendous obstacles in the very early years of his Guardianship. Some of the most prominent Bahá'ís turned against him. Avareh, who was an outstanding teacher of the Faith in Iran, thought he could tell the Guardian how to run the Cause of God. Ahmad Sohrab, who had been the secretary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, didn't like the idea of the Administrative Order and did all he could to undermine it. If you read nowadays some of the things that Ahmad Sohrab wrote, they might sound very reasonable. But you need to know how he sometimes showed his "reasonableness" in the way he mistranslated some of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks. Sometimes when 'Abdu'l-Bahá would talk about the fear of God, Ahmad Sohrab would think this wasn't the thing people wanted to hear and translated it as the love of God. To think one knows better that the Centre of the Cause is the beginning of a slippery slope.

The Guardian had to face such issues, and right at the heart of the problems he had with his family was one Bahá'í called Nayir Afnán. He had been accepted back into the Faith after having broken the Covenant and was there in the family, a descendant of Bahá'u'lláh. There is a story I was told - by Hassan Sabri, I think - about a Bahá'í who was on pilgrimage shortly after Shoghi Effendi became the Guardian and went to Bahjí. In Bahjí he was met by Nayir Afnán who lived in a little house which is now between the Shrine and the Pilgrim House. In conversation, Nayir said Shoghi Effendi was impatient and was a very difficult person to work for, but of course he had been appointed in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and they naturally had to obey. It horrified the pilgrim that someone would speak this way about the Guardian. When he returned to Haifa, Shoghi Effendi asked if he had visited Bahjí and he said

“Yes”, and he asked if he had seen anybody there and the pilgrim said “Yes, Nayir Afnán” and when Shoghi Effendi asked if Nayir had said anything the pilgrim just couldn’t bring himself to repeat the conversation and said “Oh, nothing in particular”. Later that night he thought to himself, “What have I done?. The Guardian asked me whether Nayir said anything and I didn’t tell him!” So the next morning he was up at the crack of dawn to see the Guardian and he recounted what Nayir had said, and the Guardian said to him: “We must be grateful that he accepts the Will and Testament. What he said about me doesn’t matter.”

Then, later, the Guardian’s sister, against his will, married Nayir Afnán and Nayir Afnán gradually poisoned the whole family against the Guardian. Rúhiyyih Khánum recalled how, shortly after she was married, the Guardian would sit with the members of his family and say, “This Nayir, this Nayir, this Nayir, he will destroy you all! Send him away!”. And they wouldn’t. And that is what happened: Nayir Afnán poisoned the minds of members of Shoghi Effendi’s family against him, and caused them all to break the Covenant.

I mention this now because it is the background against which you can see what Shoghi Effendi achieved. When you read those marvellous letters that he wrote to the west, *Bahá’í Administration*, the *World Order* letters, his letters encouraging the friends, all this outpouring of enthusiasm, of guidance, of love was made against a background of barbs and criticism, and problems caused for him by some of those who were closest to him. I mention this at the beginning because you should understand it, but this is not the totality of his problems. For example, shortly after he became Guardian the followers of Mírzá Muhammad-‘Alí stole the keys of the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh. Here was this young man facing such a crisis. He eventually got them back, but remember that these were the sorts of things he was dealing with when you look at what he was doing for the whole Bahá’í world. He wrote these fantastic letters, these marvellous letters, and it’s good to read them through. Don’t just dip into them. Get *Bahá’í Administration* and *The Advent of Divine Justice* and the *World Order* letters and read them through, it may take quite a while, but you’ll see the unfolding of his ideas.

The Hand of the Cause Leroy Ioas used to relate that the Guardian had once said to him: “Leroy, did you think that, when I became Guardian I had this whole pattern of the Administrative Order laid out before me and I then began to gradually unfold it to the Bahá’ís?” And Leroy replied that,

indeed, that was what he did think. The Guardian replied that it was not at all like that, he just had to take one decision after another. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said he would be guided and he trusted 'Abdu'l-Bahá. So, when something needed to be decided, Shoghi Effendi, having confidence in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promise, would decide it. He would know it was right. He would then move on and the next stage would evolve. Moreover, he didn't hesitate to change his mind occasionally. This is where one has to understand that the Manifestation of God and those that He leaves at the centre of His Faith are sensible people.

In one case, the Guardian had appointed as a goal of the plan, that a translation of Bahá'í literature was to be made into a certain language, and the National Assembly responsible wrote to him saying "We've looked to find this language but we have been told it became extinct some time ago. What do we do? Shoghi Effendi said that they should go ahead and translate into such and such another language. He didn't say "Oh dear, I've made a mistake, I can't be infallible." He said, "choose that - it doesn't work? - OK choose another one!" He had the combination of great wisdom, of great confidence and great humility, and of great good common sense, and you can see this comes out in all his writings. So I do ask you to make a point of reading through his writings. You may say it is difficult English, and in some ways it is, but that's because it's extremely good English. He says things clearly. Take a sentence of the Guardian and it seems to be a very long sentence but in fact it is a contracted paragraph. He's got so many ideas in it. And he used to read and write aloud. Rúhíyyih Khánum said he liked to read aloud when he was writing and sometimes this helps if you are having difficulties with the Guardian's writing. Read it aloud. Because that's how he wrote it, and you will see in this way how it makes sense and how it links together. You may be able to make sense without reading it aloud but, even so, it helps sometimes because you see the points in the flow of his ideas.

During all these events, the Guardian gradually built up the Bahá'í world. He started with constructing the Administrative Order. Early on, he had wanted to call for the election of the Universal House of Justice and in fact he gathered to Haifa a number of prominent Bahá'ís from around the world to consult about what could be done. But he came to the conclusion that it couldn't be done, it wasn't the time; it was premature. First he had to build the groundwork on which the House could rest. So you see all these letters about the election of Local Assemblies, how Assemblies function; the spirit that has to suffuse

consultation. And then the election of National Assemblies and how National Assemblies function. All this business of administrative functioning was essential to the Cause. Some Bahá'ís criticised him and said "What about the Divine Plan of 'Abdu'l-Bahá?" In fact this is what Ahmed Sohrab said, he said "Why are you talking about all this administration when 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan is there. Why don't you put it into action?" The Guardian explained that he had to have instruments for the work.

Martha Root was the greatest teacher we've known but very little remained of what she did because there was nothing to follow up her achievements. There was no structure, few local communities or Local Spiritual Assemblies, let alone National Assemblies, committees and so on. So this is how the Guardian approached things, with the guidance of God. As he told Leroy, he didn't see it all from the beginning but he saw what he had to do at each stage, and he did it. In those early years he raised up the structure of the Administration and then began to implement the Divine Plan of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He launched the Bahá'ís on the series of great teaching plans: first of all, the first Seven Year Plan when in the Western Hemisphere they had to establish Assemblies in every state of the United States, including Alaska, and every province of Canada, and establish a centre in each republic of Latin America; then, in the second Seven Year Plan, the teaching campaign to establish and strengthen the Faith in ten countries of the then war-torn continent of Europe

While the second Seven Year Plan was going on, Shoghi Effendi encouraged various other countries to join in. In Britain we had our Six Year Plan. That's when I had the good fortune to become a Bahá'í - towards the end of the Six Year Plan, in 1950. At that time the community was just humming. The pioneers had gone out all over the British Isles establishing the Assemblies. These were very fragile institutions. The friends had to keep re-pioneering to save the Assemblies. The National Assembly would send out almost weekly bulletins as the end of the plan approached: that there are two more gaps in this place, three more there. And the friends would get up and pioneer, and eventually the Six Year Plan was won. Just barely! With tremendous effort, but it was a basis.

At each stage, the Guardian aroused the friends to establish a foundation on which they could move forward. And the British Bahá'ís had no sooner taken a deep breath, having accepted the idea of completion of the Six Year Plan, when the Guardian

opened their minds to the idea of the Africa campaign. It's one thing to pioneer from London to Belfast, or Dublin, or somewhere like this, but to pioneer to Africa? And if you talk to pioneers of the Ten Year Crusade, you will hear a number of them hadn't the faintest idea where they were going. Şrân Muhájir tells me that when she and Dr Muhájir were to pioneer to Indonesia she had only the foggiest idea where Indonesia was, let alone what it was like. But there they went. These pioneers just arose and went out and scattered the Faith all over the world. The Guardian used to talk often of the need for the diffusion of the Faith first and then for the suffusion of the Faith in all these territories. To spread it all over the world and then, in all these countries, to increase the depth of the understanding of the Faith. This is what has been going on all this time.

Having got the plans going Shoghi Effendi was using his administration to send the Faith out in the world. He continued the building of the Administrative Order, and a great astonishment to the Bahá'í world came in 1951 when he appointed the first International Bahá'í Council. In those days, remember, we had just learnt to use Local and National Assemblies and suddenly here was an international institution that he said was the embryo of the Universal House of Justice. The very thought of the House of Justice had been way, away, in the future, but now we were given, as it were, a foretaste, and we saw something beginning to function. In the Holy Land, of course, the effect was to give the Guardian some reliable helpers at last. For a long time his helpers had been his brothers and cousins and they were the ones who turned against him. Then, of course, he had married Rúhíyyih Khánum, and she became his secretary. There is a wonderful message<sup>2</sup> he wrote referring to her as "my helpmate, my shield in warding off the darts of Covenant-breakers and my tireless collaborator in the arduous tasks I shoulder." This is really a whole other story but I hope, if Violette Nakhjavání comes again to London, that she can tell you more about Rúhíyyih Khánum, because she was the most extraordinary woman, of tremendous character, great love, great understanding and profound humility. She was the Guardian's right hand, helping him and writing his letters, and again you see the smallness of the Bahá'í world at that period. You read a letter from Rúhíyyih Khánum to the Secretary of the National Assembly of the British Isles and it starts "Dear John". John Ferraby was secretary and Rúhíyyih Khánum calls him "Dear John". He called her Rúhíyyih Khánum of course, but you can see there was this closeness and this love between the

friends. Now, with the appointment of the International Bahá'í Council, we saw some friends being sent to Haifa.

In England we were all astonished when we got a message to the National Spiritual Assembly to ask Luftullah Hakim to go to Haifa for services. Luftullah Hakim was a descendant of I think the earliest Jewish Bahá'í in the Faith and he had been pioneering. He had served 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and he was pioneering at this time in Edinburgh, and so he went to Haifa, we didn't know why. Then there were two elderly ladies who were in America, the Revell sisters, devoted Bahá'ís; they were called there too: Jessie and Ethel, and they were two wonderful souls, small lovely ladies, sisters, but very different in character.

Rúhíyyih Khánum said once that there were two saints in Haifa. One was Ethel Revell and the other was Alice Kidder. Alice was a companion of Rúhíyyih Khánum at that time, a kindly, gentle, patient soul, a qualified osteopath who helped many of us who got strains or similar problems from time to time. Ethel Revell was also a saint in every way. She had a very wry sense of humour. She completed her work every day. When she was given a job she would work at it until it was finished, and then she would go to sleep even if it took till the early hours of the morning. The next day was a new day and she started again. When I was on pilgrimage I got up rather early to get ready to leave, but Ethel Revell was up already, in the kitchen beginning to get breakfast. One of her eyes didn't work properly with the other, it looked out a little bit and she tended to hold her head on one side. And as I came into the kitchen she looked at me and she said, with a twinkle in her eye: "The early bird catches the worm. But who wants a worm anyway?" That was typical of Ethel. Now Jessie was quite a different character, a bulldog, she had the International Fund in her hands; in fact she had it in a pink toffee tin. She kept it in her room and her room was the only room in the building that had a Yale lock on it because she had the fund in there. And she would bargain for the benefit of the Faith. She was absolutely adamant in defence of the Faith. So now these two sisters were there, in Haifa, together with the other members appointed to the Council.

We had just got used to the idea of the Council being called into being by the Guardian when, the following December, in 1951, he appointed the first living Hands of the Cause of God during his ministry. Until then the only Hands we had ever thought of or heard of, were from the times of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá or the ones appointed posthumously, and clearly they were the most outstanding people, but the idea of actually

having a Hand of the Cause in this world, whom you could meet and talk to just never occurred to us. It was again something for the future. Suddenly here were the Hands of the Cause appointed by the Guardian. It was such a thrill for the Bahá'í world. And I remember that one of the few I had met at the time was Hermann Grossmann. And his character was so outstanding that, once he was appointed, I thought "Oh yes, that's what a Hand is like".

These Hands were appointed all around the world, and it was only 1951. The Guardian had already started building the Administrative Order at the base, and then got the National Assemblies going, and then, suddenly, he started from the top on the other arm of the Administration, so here was the Guardian appointing his Hands. And they had been functioning only a short time when he called on them to appoint the Auxiliary Board Members. No one had even heard of the Auxiliary Board members before – these helpers to the Hands that the Hands themselves had to appoint. And some of the Hands were asking the Guardian whom they should appoint, but the Guardian replied that that was their job, He was appointing them and they were to appoint their Auxiliary Board Members. This whole concept was quite new and very difficult for some Bahá'ís, because we had got out of the way of thinking of certain Bahá'ís as being kingpins, we had got used to thinking of institutions as the authoritative bodies and then suddenly to have individuals who had rank and status and advisory authority over Assemblies rather jangled the brains of the some of the friends. They found it difficult to accept because we hadn't got used to the idea that the Administrative Order has two pillars, and one of them is this pillar of appointed persons, the Hands of the Cause and their Board members, doing certain functions which are different from the sorts of functions we are used to in other religions. They are not a clergy. They are very different.

The Guardian, in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, describes these different elements of the Bahá'í Administration. That is again another letter to read through very carefully. For example, Shoghi Effendi includes the principle of democracy which is evident in the method of election. There is the principle of the monarchy which is in a sense the Guardian and his functions. Then of course there is the quality of aristocracy. Now some friends thought the Hands were the aristocrats, but that's not it. The principle of aristocracy appears in the responsibility of Spiritual Assemblies and their members to decide what they believe is right; not merely what they think the people would

want. Assemblies are responsible to consult the Bahá'ís, to find out what the Bahá'ís think, to find out what they need. But their responsibility is to God, to decide by their conscience what they believe is right. Now this is what aristocracy means, "the rule of the best". It is the principle of our elective bodies. Thus the principle of a Bahá'í election is for the believer to vote for the best that he or she can. That does not mean that those elected are going to be marvellous - we are all just human beings; but that is the aristocratic principle, that we should elect people who we think are the best available, not just those who we expect to do what we want them to do. The sovereign is not the people, the sovereign is God. This is the Kingdom of God on earth, not the republic of God on earth. And when we elect our Spiritual Assemblies we are electing those who we feel are best. Whom we can consult, whom we can advise, but whom we will obey. This is the aristocratic principle of the Faith, and it's interesting how the Hands followed the same pattern when the Universal House of Justice came into being and they accepted its authority. But I will come to that later.

The Guardian had been building all this, and had given us the vision of the Ten Year Crusade, which we were pursuing, when he suddenly passed away. This was a most tremendous blow to the Bahá'í world. He was young, 60 years old, when he died and we loved the Guardian so intensely. As I said, it was a small world and there were many Bahá'ís who had met the Guardian. One of the greatest blessings of my life is that I had the bounty of doing so. He was such a considerate person, and full of enthusiasm. He had majesty - you would never underestimate the stature of the Guardian - but he was so loving. I was a British pilgrim, and when he welcomed me the first thing he started talking about was the weather; he knew British people talked about the weather! That was an example of how he helped pilgrims to feel at ease.

I learnt later from Rúhíyyih Khánum how he had solved a problem in relation to the western pilgrims. I mention this because it is an example of how the Guardian dealt with such issues. The problem was this, that the pilgrims used to be gathered in a room, and the Guardian would come in to meet them, and, as you know, in western society ladies do not stand up for men when they come into the room. So some of the western ladies, when the Guardian came in, would continue sitting and hold out their hand to be shaken and say "How do you do Shoghi Effendi?" Shoghi Effendi couldn't permit this to continue. To start with, it was too terrible a test for the



oriental Bahá'ís who might witness it and he couldn't allow that to happen. But he didn't issue an instruction that when the Guardian comes in would everyone please stand up, including the ladies. He so arranged it that in future he would be in the room first. And then the pilgrims came in and so, of course, they were standing up. (They didn't come in sitting down!). And then he could welcome them and show them to their seats. He was a perfect host welcoming his guests. This is the sort of way he solved problems. Nevertheless, he could be angry sometimes. God knows, he often had sufficient reason to be angry. He himself said he was not the exemplar of Bahá'í life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was that. Nevertheless, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also could be angry when necessary; and also Bahá'u'lláh Himself.

The degree of love reached its peak in the Manifestation of God. Rúhiyyih Khánum told me that throughout her childhood it had been 'Abdu'l-Bahá to whom she had felt most close and, when she married, she asked one of the members of the Holy Family, whether Bahá'u'lláh was really as loving as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was. And this member of the Holy Family said, "Oh, compared with Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wasn't loving at all!" So we get a little glimpse of the degree of the qualities of the Manifestation of God.

But, to get back to the Guardian, Rúhiyyih Khánum said that when, on occasion, he was angry, you could feel the whole house shake. But, of course, he usually wasn't angry with the pilgrims. He was so loving, so understanding, so interested in the pilgrims, he could see the genuineness of character.

One of the things I was frightened about when I went on pilgrimage was that I had a sneaking feeling that the Guardian could see right through me. He would know what I was like. And that is a very uncomfortable feeling in relation to anybody, and if it's the Guardian of the Cause of God, it is extremely uncomfortable. The resolution of that worry was given to me in getting a glimpse of the nature of the Guardian himself. I felt that, indeed, he saw right through me, but I also realized that although he really knew you, there was the consolation that the flaws he just ignored. They were not what he was interested in. What he concentrated on was any possibilities that he could do something with. Any possibility for positive capacity he would then encourage. Many pilgrims had this similar experience. He had this positive effect on the friends, and aroused their great love and affection. The friends loved him very, very dearly and when he passed away it wasn't only the loss of the Guardian that we suffered, it was the loss of Shoghi Effendi himself

His funeral, as you know, was in London and Rúhíyyih Khánúm was here. She comforted the friends, and she rallied the Hands and took them back to Haifa and we received the wonderful message that the Hands sent out from their first Conclave, and they took forward the whole Ten Year Crusade to a vic<sup>1</sup>torious conclusion.

The Guardian had been very worried by the midpoint of the Crusade that the impetus was dying down, the outflow of the pioneers had lessened. And he spoke to two lots of pilgrims in two different ways. He said something similar to several groups of pilgrims, but to one group he said "I called on them to pioneer and they wouldn't go, I called upon them to disperse and they wouldn't go. They will leave as refugees." To others he said "I called on them to pioneer and they wouldn't go, I called upon them to disperse and they wouldn't go, I will not call upon them again." And not long after that he passed away.

Then, when the Hands reminded the Bahá'ís of the goals of the Ten Year Crusade, the whole Bahá'í world rose up and the Crusade was won. With the winning of the Crusade we had the wonderful Congress here, and the House of Justice had been elected. And this is where the House of Justice comes into the picture.

The Universal House of Justice was faced with this situation once it was elected: what happens to the Guardianship? There had been some disagreement among the friends. Some said "Obviously the Will and Testament says how the Guardian is to be appointed, this can't be done, so there can't be any Guardian." Others were saying "Obviously there must be a Guardian, it's part of the whole Administrative Order. There must be a Guardian." The Hands very wisely said "Stop speculating, that's not your business. Only the Universal House of Justice can give an answer." And I remember that, when Mason Remey broke the Covenant, claiming to be the second Guardian, and the French NSA followed him, a new NSA was quickly elected and a meeting of all the European National Spiritual Assemblies was called, attended by the members of the new French NSA. The Hand of the Cause Mr Faizi came to Europe and attended this conference. He told all the friends, "The House of Justice is shortly going to come into existence. Beware! Don't form any preconceived conceptions of what the House of Justice will decide, or you will test yourself. Be ready

for whatever it decides.”

From the point of view of the House of Justice this was, of course, a tremendous problem. The Will and Testament, you see, does not say how a Guardian is to be appointed. The Will and Testament says firstly, about Shoghi Effendi, that Shoghi Effendi will be succeeded by the first-born of his lineal descendants. Now one problem is what is meant by lineal? Is it only his children or does it include the other collateral branches. We don't know, we never had to answer the question. But that's in the air. Then, later on in the Will it states that the Guardian must appoint his successor in his lifetime and this choice is to be approved by the nine Hands of the Cause of God in the Holy Land. If the Guardian's eldest son does not fulfil the spiritual qualities of appointment then he should choose another branch and appoint him. It says nothing about what the Guardian should do if all his sons turn out to be hopeless. Or if there's no one he could appoint. Which is what happened. The Guardian had no sons, and all his brothers and sisters and cousins had broken the Covenant. There was no branch for him to appoint. People asked why the Guardian did not say anything about this.

The House of Justice in one of its letters, written on 27 May 1966<sup>3</sup>, says we should understand that “in his very silence there is a wisdom and a sign of his infallible guidance.” If you look at the way he explains the Will and Testament it is quite clear that the Guardian's function is interpretation of the Sacred texts. He interprets the Faith, he defends the Faith, he does not legislate on what the text leaves open. And he himself used to stress that he was meticulous in not legislating. Even with the Declaration of Trust and By-laws of National Spiritual Assemblies, he got the American National Assembly to formulate and enact the Declaration of Trust and By-laws, informed by his guidance. But he didn't legislate them. He got a National House of Justice to make this law. It wasn't for him to say what the friends should do if the Will and Testament leaves something uncovered. When some friends had expressed to him their worries, he had said that they had the Will and Testament and the Universal House of Justice to turn to. And that's what he did. He couldn't have said anything, it wasn't a matter of interpretation, so he didn't say anything.

But then the Universal House of Justice was faced with the problem: what do we have to do? Are we given this function of legislation just so that in such a situation we can appoint a successor? If we cannot appoint a successor, could we make a law of how a successor can be appointed for Shoghi Effendi? Is

that why we have this authority? Or is that something far beyond our capacity and it would be a breach of our authority to do that? This consultation had to be worked through and the House of Justice also consulted the Hands in the Holy Land. We now know exactly what the House of Justice eventually said, in its message of 9 October 1963<sup>4</sup>: “The Universal House of Justice finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.”. That is what it decided and it is all it decided. Don’t go extrapolating this with your own understandings. We are not interpreters of the Cause, any of us. The House of Justice is not the Interpreter of the Cause, it is not a prophet. It stated what it concluded and we know what it is. That is enough.

Later when friends asked questions, the House of Justice explained how these events did not undermine the Covenant, how the House of Justice’s authority was clearly in the texts, and how authoritative interpretation, in the absence of the Guardian, is no longer there. You should make yourselves familiar with these letters.<sup>5</sup>

Later, also, the House of Justice had to decide whether it could appoint more Hands of the Cause of God, but this is a different situation. You see, the text of the Will and Testament is different in the two situations, it doesn’t say how a Guardian *is to be appointed by his predecessor*, it says how the living Guardian is to appoint his successor. It is an active statement, not a passive one. In the case of the Hands it *does say* how the Hands are to be appointed: by the Guardian. It is a passive statement, not an active one. So, without the Guardian you cannot appoint any Hands. The House of Justice then had to discuss this whole relationship between the House of Justice and the Hands. Had it authority to tell them what to do? In the absence of the Guardian, yes, it was the Head of the Faith. So it then developed its relationship with the Hands. Then it was able to bring into being the Boards of Counsellors, who are not Hands, but they perform some of the functions of the Hands, and they are able to carry forward this whole side of the teaching and protection of the Faith, that the Hands had been responsible for.

In all this work of filling in the gaps in the system – of reconstructing the system – the House of Justice was continually referring back to the texts of the Guardian and consulting the Hands. It used to meet regularly every week with the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land and, every time the

Hands had a Conclave each year, it would meet with the Conclave and discuss the next major decision to be made. So there was a very close inter-relationship between the Hands and the House of Justice. It was a profoundly loving relationship that deepened over the years. A very sad experience for the members of the House of Justice over these past years has been the passing of the Hands.

Two very serious events have, as it were, burned the hearts of the members of the House of Justice. One is the persecution in Iran where it had to study every aspect of the situation, seek the advice of the friends in Iran and then decide what should be done on each occasion, hoping and praying that no action it took would precipitate any worse persecutions. This gradually took things forward. To a major degree, the guidance had the desired effect, but the friends continued to suffer very much in Iran and this has been a burden on the House for many years. The other has been the gradual loss of the Hands of the Cause – this whole institution which had been there, as a faithful bulwark, since the Universal House of Justice came into being. Slowly individual Hands passed away. Some suddenly, some through old age. One, Enoch Olinga, being murdered. From the House of Justice members' point of view they were not just high officers of the Faith that we were losing, they were intimate friends that we would not see any more.

It was the passing of 'Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum on 19 January 2000, however, that had the most profound effect on the Bahá'í World Centre. She had been a tower of strength to the Universal House of Justice for all those years. She had served the Guardian with unshakable fidelity and she unhesitatingly transferred this loyalty to the House of Justice. And just as she often asked the Guardian questions, she was often raising issues with the House of Justice. I remember, one evening when I was on pilgrimage, one of the pilgrims at the dinner table asked Shoghi Effendi to confirm whether what he had just said meant so and so. Rúhiyyih Khánum obviously thought that the pilgrim had misunderstood, and she intervened and said "Oh no!" and the Guardian turned to her and said "Oh yes!" This is in front of the pilgrims! The Guardian spoke so freely in front of the pilgrims. And there was this lovely relationship between him and Rúhiyyih Khánum and he would, as it were, pull her leg occasionally. She used to take little vitamin pills, and he would comment at the table about Americans' being very fond of pills. There was this complete freedom of expression and absolute devotion that she gave to

the Guardian, that she transferred to the House of Justice. Again and again, if she thought something was going wrong at the World Centre, or something developing that could lead to problems, she would come and meet with the House of Justice and say what she thought and what she recommended be done. And then she faithfully followed whatever the House of Justice decided. So the loss of ‘Amatu’l-Bahá, in this and in countless other ways was a tremendous blow to the House of Justice. But, thank God, Mr ‘Alí-Akbar Furútan was to live for almost another four more years, until 26 November 2003, and we still have the blessing of the presence of Dr ‘Alí-Muhammad Varqá, a Hand of the Cause who is also the occupant of the oldest institution in the whole Bahá’í World Order: The Trustee of Huqúqu’lláh. This is a very great, a vital, institution, and Dr Varqá is still taking part in its development<sup>6</sup>.

These years have seen the inter-locking relationship between the Guardian and the House of Justice in both administrative developments and the teaching work. As would be expected, the House of Justice has carried forward and developed the pattern that Shoghi Effendi established. Over these decades, as the House of Justice mentioned in a recent letter, the whole Bahá’í world has been experimenting and learning, and it has been able to summarize the lessons of what works well and what is less fruitful. This is really what the present push of the Faith is, this whole matter of training institutes, the core activities, the development of clusters, is a systematic approach to the teaching work which the House of Justice has deduced from the successes of the friends in their pursuit of their work. That is why now, I think, things need to go forward so fast.

We are seeing, I think, an interaction, a kind of spiritual conversation between the Universal House of Justice and the Bahá’í world on how things are best done. As the Bahá’í world responds to the guidance of the House of Justice, we can see the Faith going faster and faster forward. This is the same pattern as the Guardian followed.

What the future will hold we don’t know. But we can be quite certain the Covenant is there, it is strong and nothing can shake it. We had the Guardian for 36 years without the House of Justice, and now we have the House of Justice for maybe another thousand years without the Guardian – I don’t know how long. It’s not our business, that is God’s business. At the present time we have the Universal House of Justice and that is quite enough to enable the Bahá’ís to build the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh.

Thank you!

## Questions and Answers

**Q:** Why is membership of the House of Justice exclusively confined to men?

**A:** The short answer to that is: I haven't the faintest idea. But I believe we should think about it, not in the particular square in which the question is posed, but rather think a bit about why it is a problem. How do we conceive of elections and the nature of elections and the nature of being elected? You see, in the world as a whole, democracies have usually evolved as a result of a struggle against a tyranny. Either wresting power from the monarch which has sort of happened in the British constitutional process or, as in America, of constructing a constitution which carefully pits each of three powers against the others to try and counter-balance one another because you cannot trust any one of them. Now this is the basic thing. Democracy is regarded as a way of achieving power in order to limit power. It's all about power and that's why you have this odd concept of winning an election. That an election is something that one person wins and another one loses, because the candidates want to get power for some purpose.

The candidate may want to have power for beneficial ideas, he may want all this for the good of the people. He may also want power for very bad ideas. Hitler was elected democratically in Germany and then got the power and misused it. It is all about power and the limiting of power. Now my point is that, in the Bahá'í administration, that is a total misconception. Bahá'í elections have nothing to do with power. Bahá'í elections and the whole administration is to do with service. Nobody ever seeks to be elected or appointed, (Although I do remember one year we did have a letter to the House of Justice from an individual Bahá'í who said he thought he would make a very good Counsellor!). But that's not the normal approach because it isn't the Bahá'í concept. You don't say I would like to be the Chairman of a Local Assembly, how do I get myself elected? It just shouldn't occur to Bahá'ís.

The whole Bahá'í process gives absolute freedom to the electors and no freedom at all to those who have been elected, or very little freedom. There are no nominations, there is no electioneering, the electors are left free to use their own good sense as to who are the nine people who are best suited to be on this particular body. And they vote. Now the nine people who

are elected are not given a choice as to whether or not they want to serve. The Guardian said he deprecated refusal to serve. If you are elected, you serve, unless there is a very good reason why you cannot, in which case you ask the Assembly to allow you to resign. Which is what happens to members of the House of Justice when they get decrepit like me. You have to ask "May I resign because I cannot do my work properly?" The House of Justice says "Yes" and you can resign. And that's what's happened in each case when a member of the House of Justice has resigned, not because they are a certain age, but because they have come to a conclusion that they cannot carry out the work the House of Justice requires them to carry out. So that's the situation.

Now, the voter conveys authority to the people he or she elects. But the power in the Bahá'í Faith, as the Guardian said, is in the hands of the individual believers. The Assembly can do nothing unless the individual believers do what they are guided to do.

So the thinking is that the people who are voting are conveying authority upon a group of people to carry out what they believe in their own judgment is the right thing. Therefore it is quite wrong for anyone who is elected to think "Ah, good! Now I have some power, now I can get this thing done." That's not his job, his job or her job is to serve on the Assembly and to be a member of a consultative body to find out what is the correct thing to do in a particular situation taking into account the wishes of the Bahá'ís and the conditions of the Bahá'ís. What, therefore, does this mean for women, as far as membership on the Universal House of Justice is concerned? And it's only that body - all the other bodies of the Bahá'í Faith that are appointed or elected are open to men and women. The only thing that happens is that women are not permitted to be elected to the Universal House of Justice. But then this isn't a refusal to give them power. It is an exemption from having to perform a service. Every Bahá'í man in the world, if he is elected, has to perform this duty. You can't have a man elected to the House of Justice saying "Sorry I am too busy, I'm in the middle of my career, I'm a great artist, please I can't..." David Ruhe was in a situation like that. He was a fine doctor, and he was an expert in medical education, and he loved that and he was about to ask permission to resign from the American NSA to get back to his profession, when he was elected to the House of Justice. And no one asked any more questions. He was elected and he rendered great services, and at the same time he



managed to do some medical work which in itself was a service to the Faith in Haifa.

This is the way you should think about the issue. If it's an exemption from performing a service maybe you would say this is not very polite to women, but that's an interpretation. The fact remains that it is an exemption in that sense. It is not something they are entitled to have – some power they are entitled to get – of which they are deprived

This is merely my own thinking about it. But think is what you have to do. You have to think outside the square and consider what is the nature of service, what is the nature of administration, and what is the concept of power and authority in the Bahá'í community. Then ultimately as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, a time will come when it will be as clear as the noonday sun. As yet, I don't think it is.

**Q:** Please tell us something more about the personality of Shoghi Effendi, for example, about his voice, his smile, how he chanted and his sense of humour.

**A:** I never heard Shoghi Effendi chant because the westerners didn't. He chanted in the presence of the eastern men, he took them to the Shrine and chanted there. But I am sure he must have had a very melodious chanting voice. The Persian friends who heard him said he did. And his speaking voice was very melodious. It was a strong voice, it wasn't a loud voice. But it was strong and very clear. And he spoke beautiful English. He was crystal clear in his thinking. One night he got us to look at the map of the world that he was designing and his hands were quite firm as he was pointing out various things, vigorous hands, strong hands and vigorous. He had very beautiful hands, fine and nicely formed. Rúhíyyih Khánum said that the Greatest Holy Leaf used to hold Shoghi Effendi's hands and say "These are my Father's hands" because he had hands very like those of Bahá'u'lláh. And his humour: he had a very acute sense of humour. One night I remember we were looking at designs for temples and he got Rúhíyyih Khánum to get out some designs that were rejected for the Temple in Tihrán. They were most peculiar. He got Anna Grossmann to hold up one of them so we could see it, and he said, "Look! It looks like a frog. Anna what's the German for frog?" Anna couldn't get the German word *Frosch* out because she was laughing, and then the Guardian began to laugh. I think he was of that generation when it wasn't polite to laugh out loud. He didn't guffaw, he sort of bubbled over with laughter. Everyone who knew him said he had

a very acute sense of humour and a very lovely sense of humour. He was very kindly and very understanding to people.

One of Rúhíyyih Khánúm's favourite stories was about the Guardian and Charles Dunning. Here I should explain the seating in the dining room in those days. The dining table was in a small room, placed so that the long side faced the door through which one entered. The Guardian sat at the right end of the long side, facing the incoming pilgrims, whom he would welcome as they entered.. To his right sat 'Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm and the members of the International Council who were present. To his left, at the end of the table sat either Charles Mason Remey or, if he was absent, the most recently arrived pilgrim. As new pilgrims arrived they moved on down the side of the table opposite the Guardian. A Knight of Bahá'u'lláh, however, would not move on down; he or she would remain near the Guardian.

Charlie Dunning was the Knight of Bahá'u'lláh for the Orkney Islands, a wonderful Bahá'í. He was a little man, and he looked like Popeye. He and Shoghi Effendi would talk, and he would wave his finger at Shoghi Effendi's nose and say "Guardian. they tell me so and so", and the Guardian would lean towards him and answer, and they would talk in this way. The Guardian loved Charles Dunning. He saw the beauty and the spirit in Charlie although most people would think he was a funny little man. And the thing that struck me after Charlie had been on pilgrimage, and it's made me think a lot about the way one's appearance mirrors one's soul, you might say, because Charlie spoke at the National Convention about his pilgrimage, and the thing that struck me was that superficially Charlie was an ugly little man, but when he was talking about his pilgrimage he was beautiful. Really beautiful. And he hadn't changed, his features were the same, but this was a beautiful person talking, and I think his soul was as it were reflecting what the Guardian had seen in him.

So these are just some of the characteristics of the Guardian. I am afraid it is not very much, I'm not very good at explaining. Shoghi Effendi is in a sense inexplicable. I just wish you all could have met him.

**Q:** How would you explain the concept of the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice to a seeker?

**A:** Infallibility is such a difficult word to define. And if possible I think, if you are talking to a seeker, unless the seeker

is very close to the Faith, avoid the issue, because it sounds so strange in the western ear and is linked up of course with the concept of papal infallibility in the minds of western people. So there is a prejudice against it to start with.

In a sense, the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is the culmination of consultation. The principle of consultation is that one mind is generally not enough, that it is good for several people to consult together with the idea of achieving a good solution. This is simply a process of the interrelationship of human beings, of creating a bigger mind than one. It isn't only for the House of Justice. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that if a Local Spiritual Assembly consults in the right way it will receive divine guidance. It is, one might say, putting itself in harmony with the spirit of the universe, and, when it does, it decides the right things. The only difference between the Local Assembly and the Universal House of Justice is that the Universal House of Justice always achieves such a decision. Now that's an oversimplification, the way you might explain it to a seeker, it describes a way of electing people in various stages, who know the Faith well enough, so that when they consult together they produce a decision that's in harmony with the facts, and with the nature of the universe and, in that sense, is infallible.

I think that in reality it is much more than that, and it's difficult to specify it. I mean most consultations of the House of Justice are like any Assembly consultation: a consensus emerges. But the House of Justice has to be much more patient in getting its decision. It knows it has to be the right decision, and I remember on one occasion where it got to the point where eight of the nine members thoroughly agreed to one particular course of action and one member didn't. And the reaction of the other eight was: what has he seen that we haven't? And to continue consulting. On one occasion I remember, it ended up with all the other eight agreeing with the ninth. But I have seen similar situations when we thought we hadn't quite got it, and asked to continue consulting, and eventually the majority decided "Yes, we have understood it, we just don't agree, that's all." and we'd take a majority decision. But it needs careful thinking and the wish to get the right answer. Sometimes the Guardian said he would occasionally be given unusual insights as a result of the power of Bahá'u'lláh, it wasn't his own capacity, it was Bahá'u'lláh wanting him to know something, and so he knew it. There's a story I heard of the Guardian coming into the room one day waving an unopened letter saying, "He's lying!"

Now he may have known the character of the person who was writing, I don't know, but that's the sort of thing that makes you sit up. But I remember one occasion when the House of Justice was discussing a question, and it was the end of the day and there was a unanimous decision, we all wanted to do the same thing, but suddenly someone said: "Hadn't we better wait until tomorrow? Do we have to make this decision tonight?" So we decided to wait until the next morning. The next morning in the mail came information which changed the whole picture. That's not a thing to discuss with a seeker because it sounds peculiar. We have to be aware of these things: that when we are dealing with the spiritual world, peculiar things can happen. But generally the House of Justice's consultation is just like that of any Local Assembly which is practised in consultation.

**Q:** What pitfalls should a budding Bahá'í scholar avoid?

**A:** One has to realize what one is dealing with when one is dealing with the Faith. I remember when it was suggested one day that, at some Bahá'í institution, we should have a course that would lead to a Master in Bahá'í Studies, and the House of Justice said this is impossible. You can't have a human being saying "I am a Bahá'í and I am a Master of Bahá'í studies." How big is this revelation for a 1,000 years or more? How can you be a master of it? It's terminological nonsense. You can have a Master's degree in the application of the Bahá'í teachings to conflict management or something like that, but in Bahá'í Studies? No one is a master of Bahá'í studies. All of us are at the kindergarten stage of understanding the Faith. And we shall be for quite a long time yet. So it's first of all getting one's understanding of the Faith into perspective. To what extent can one expect to be a Master of something that is a Revelation of God to take us forward for one or more thousand years. It's impossible. But a scholar shouldn't ever conceive of himself as someone who has understood everything.

The essence of a scholar is a person who has the temperament, and the skill and the capacity to study a thing seriously. To study it meticulously, and profoundly and carefully. That is a scholar, and a budding scholar is someone who is learning how to do this. It is not always easy, it's very difficult in present day society, for example, I remember one scholar saying that, in order to write anything acceptable, you had to have read 'the literature' and been able to quote it. What in the world did he mean by 'the literature'? There's a vast number of letters by Bahá'u'lláh, which have not been translated yet. OK, so he can't mean all Bahá'í literature. He meant the

published writings of other scholars on that subject. That isn't all the literature; it happens to be what a few scholars have written in English. What about all the Chinese scholars or the Indian scholars, or the Latin American or German scholars. You can't read all the literature on any subject, you may read all the current literature, but that is hardly adequate. What, therefore, should we understand by this need "to read and quote all the literature?"

I think we must accept that the pattern of modern academic scholarship isn't simply a matter of scholarship carried out in order to understand something. We have got a body of people who are engaged in academia and who, out of courtesy to their fellow scholars, should acknowledge the contribution other scholars have made to their thinking. Say, if Mr Smith has read Mr Jones' book and he has involved it in his thinking, he should say he has read Mr Jones' book. Likewise, if there is a published source that counters Mr. Smith's argument, it would be helpful to the reader for Mr. Smith to refer to it and indicate why he does not accept its validity. That's where you have to quote your sources and give your references to other people.

But how is one to conceive of this obligation? Are you going to say that, when a writer presents his ideas cogently, but without quoting everyone else who has written on the subject, that his scholarship is worthless because he hasn't read this and that? It may not be worthless. It may just have gaps. So I think that budding Bahá'í scholars should get into the way of accepting that whatever they produce is, in its essence, full of gaps, and be content with that, and try to decrease the number of gaps and increase the accuracy of what they are saying, to be meticulous. That I think is the way to do scholarship.

Then you can do all sorts of things, but I think one has to be devoted to the truth of the matter not necessarily to certain patterns of scholarship. Much scholarship these days is basically 100% materialist. For a Bahá'í to leave out everything except materialism is difficult, to say the least!

**Q:** How do we guard against the emergence of fundamentalism within the Bahá'í community?

**A:** It think you have to have a very good sense of humour. And patience. Some people are very eager. And they sound enthusiastic, too enthusiastic. And then one's got to get people to be able to look around things. Does it make sense? One has got the principle that Bahá'u'lláh says one should go back to the

Texts. And we should base everything on the Revelation. But also on experience in life. One of the problems people sometimes fall into, sounds like fundamentalism. It is to say "Look! In this text Bahá'u'lláh says so and so, and that's it. Finish!" But then they've forgotten that in another text Bahá'u'lláh says something else that means exactly the opposite. And you have to understand that, and see how the texts relate to one another, and think about things.

A fundamentalist temperamentally is someone who wants to stop you thinking. And of course that's where a sense of humour comes in, because you say this is ridiculous. The way to stop getting into fundamentalism is to insist on thinking about things. Examine them. Remember what the Guardian wrote. I've heard some people say that independent investigation of truth is until you find Bahá'u'lláh; after that it doesn't apply. But the Guardian has written that the Bahá'í Faith "enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth..."<sup>7</sup> So why, therefore, do you continue investigating truth after you have found Bahá'u'lláh? The answer is because you have the humility to recognise that you are a fallible human being and unless you keep thinking hard and investigating hard, you are not going to understand what Bahá'u'lláh said. You are going to misunderstand it, and that's fundamentalism: misunderstanding and misapplying a Revelation and insisting that you are right.

**Q:** How should we approach the study of the writings of Shoghi Effendi?

**A:** One should study the writings of Shoghi Effendi as part of one's general study. We have the Bahá'í law that you are meant to read the holy scriptures morning and evening, and I think it's very good, when doing that in the case of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, to make a pattern always of reading through all the writings of Bahá'u'lláh one book after another until you finish the lot and then start again. If you just read the bits you like, it's not the best idea. Each time you read through the book it will enrich your understanding, which helps you the next time you read through, so you continue to read and that you have to do anyway, whether you are studying the writings of Shoghi Effendi or not.

But to understand the Revelation, it is vital also to read the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. You can take excerpts from the Guardian's writings, such as

*Call to the Nations*, and it is helpful to do so, but, fundamentally, I think one should, as far as possible, simply read through all his published writings, at least the major ones. Just read them through, patiently, and think about them. Because there are many things he covered. And it is probably best to start with what the Guardian himself wrote rather than depending solely upon collections of excerpts from letters written on his behalf by his Secretaries.

But then that isn't all you are doing in your life because you're living in your local community, and perhaps helping to administer it. You are involved in teaching the Faith. So you've got to keep looking at many books. But for a methodical study of the Guardian's writings, there's nothing like going right through, reading the whole of *God Passes By* and all his writings like that, slowly, slowly, I think!<sup>8</sup>

**Q:** Could you please share some of your recollections of the first International Convention for the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963?

**A:** They are rather limited, my recollections, because of course I was on the Council and one of the functions of the Council was to prepare for the election of the House of Justice, and so we had all the nitty-gritty work like getting the ballots out, getting the delegates registered and so on. It was a very exciting time. The Hands were very worried, because they were deeply concerned that nothing should go wrong in that election. There were some Bahá'ís at that time, one or two, who had obviously set out to tour the Bahá'í world, donating things here and there and making themselves very popular and very well-known, and the Hands were worried that in some cases it was not genuine. Some people are very generous people, but in other cases there was a little electioneering going on. But the Hands thought "What can we do? If we interfere it is the same thing, we must just trust to Bahá'u'lláh". And they did, and none of those who were fiddle-faddling got elected. So the delegates were sensible enough, and Bahá'u'lláh looked after His Cause well enough, that the problem went away. But that didn't stop the Hands worrying at the time. So as part of that process of trying not to influence the ballots when the delegates were arriving, the Hands decided that no males at the World Centre would contact the delegates – At all, no matter who they were. The women in Haifa looked after the delegates, took them on their pilgrimages and so on.

I had a difficulty at one point: being the Assistant Secretary

of the International Council I had to get in touch with Borrah Kavelin, who was both a member of the Council and Chairman of the American NSA. He was the Member at Large of the Council. And we were going to have a Council meeting and I had to get word to Borrah to come and join the meeting of the Council. He was staying in a hotel called the Lev HaCarmel Hotel on top of the mountain. So I went up there in the evening, and the only way I could think of getting a letter to him was to sneak through the bushes and the shrubbery up to the office of the hotel and pop it through the window to the staff and tell them "Please give that to Mr Kavelin", so I did that, and disappeared through the bushes back out again. And the Council had its meeting.

These are little details but they were part of the care the Hands took in the management of the Convention. Then of course there was the question of where to hold the election and Rúhiyyih Khánum hoped very much we could have it in the Masters' House. One evening, 'Alí and I were with her, and we thought we probably could manage it if we took all the doors off the rooms in the central hall, so she suggested we try it out. So we took all the doors off and measured all the floors and found we could just get all the delegates into that hall, and that's how it was decided to hold the election in the Master's House, which was very appropriate and wonderful. The spirit of the delegates was so beautiful, they were coming to elect the Universal House of Justice and the whole atmosphere was beautiful, they had a little pilgrimage first and they then gathered in the Master's House, and the election took place, and the next day the results were announced in the Convention session at Beit Harofe. So it was a very beautiful experience.

**Q:** Of all the many extraordinary experiences you had in the Holy Land is it possible to single out one that was the most moving?

**A:** It is almost impossible to do so because there were so many moving events. And many of them were very similar. I mean moving in the sense of sad. There were many sad happenings: the news of the martyrdoms in Iran, the murder of Enoch Olinga. Very sad things happened. Then there were joyful things, the news of wonderful teaching work, the attainment of vital objectives, such as the completion of the Constitution, and so on.

In the process of consultation there were some things that were very moving. Sometimes it would happen that suddenly a



lot of individuals would write asking very similar questions or suggesting similar subjects for the House of Justice to consider. At another time the House of Justice might have scheduled a consultation on a subject that it felt required consideration in depth. In either case – and, indeed, on other occasions too – the consultation would start in the normal way, with members exchanging ideas, and then, quite suddenly one would get the feeling that the consultation was taking off. And it would evolve way above anything that was being thought of in the earlier stages of consultation. A whole new concept would emerge in this process of consultation. And the feeling, as I recall it, would be one of exaltation: “This is right! this is what the answer should be!” and no one had thought of it before. It was as if events had conspired for the House of Justice to consult on this particular problem, and this was the conclusion that emerged. That was a very exalting feeling, a very moving one to have. Apart from that there was nothing in particular. There were many happy things as well as sad ones.

Thank you!

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<sup>2</sup> *Message to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada*, 1 March 1951

<sup>3</sup> *MUHJ 1963-1986*: Section 35.3

<sup>4</sup> *MUHJ 1963-1986*: Section 5.1

<sup>5</sup> *MUHJ 1963-1986*: Sections 5, 23, 35, 59, 75

<sup>6</sup> Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá passed away on 22 September 2007

<sup>7</sup> *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, page 4

<sup>8</sup> In 2004, 2005 and 2006, Mr. 'Alí Nakhjavání gave three courses for the European Bahá'í youth at Acuto in Italy. These courses were later published in book form by the Casa Editrice Bahá'í and provide a brilliant survey of Shoghi Effendi's work. They are called *Towards World Order*, *Shoghi Effendi: Author of Teaching Plans* and *Shoghi Effendi: The Range and Power of his Pen*. I did not know of their existence when I gave this talk, and now urge friends who are not familiar with Shoghi Effendi's writings to read these three books as a guide to them.

# The Rise of Justice in the Spiritual and Secular Life of Man

An Exposition on excerpts from *The Advent of Divine Justice* by Shoghi Effendi

James B. Thomas

## Introduction

Shoghi Effendi, the Beloved Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and great grandson of its founder Bahá'u'lláh, began the follow-up to the ground work laid out in his previous letter *The Unfoldment of World Civilization in 1936* with his treatise, *The Advent of Divine Justice* in late December of 1938. The purpose here is to examine four vital issues in this pivotal work. First is the manner in which he raised the consciousness of the young Bahá'í community in the West to a deeper level of Bahá'í theology as the dark clouds of WWII were beginning to sweep over Europe. Second is the systematic manner by which the Guardian introduced methods for expansion of the Faith while in the midst of a disintegrating society including how barriers were to be overcome in the face of enormous challenges. Third is the introduction of a form of justice not seen before in human history. Fourth is the special role that the American Bahá'í community would play in the future progress of the Faith with special emphasis on the unique station of its community and of its members.

He addressed the young American Bahá'í community just when it was endeavoring to achieve one of the many plans, which would ultimately be assigned to them in the fullness of time. He found it difficult to adequately express his joy and exultation when contemplating "the ceaseless evidences of the dynamic energy which animates the stalwart pioneers of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh in the execution of the Plan committed to their charge." He applauded the close cohesive interaction and harmony between the various agencies that constituted the basic framework of every properly functioning

Bahá'í community. And he referred to this as a "striking contrast to the disruptive tendencies" which the discordant elements of society so tragically manifested. (ADJ-2)

## Recurrent Crises

These disruptive tendencies caused recurrent crises that were described as "afflicting an ever-increasing portion of the human race" which must continue to exercise, at least temporarily, a morbidly negative influence on the young Bahá'í community that had by then reached the far corners of the world, albeit in small numbers. He asked:

How can the beginnings of a world upheaval, unleashing forces that are so gravely deranging the social, the religious, the political, and the economic equilibrium of organized society, throwing into chaos and confusion political systems, racial doctrines, social conceptions, cultural standards, religious associations, and trade relationships -- how can such agitations, on a scale so vast, so unprecedented, fail to produce any repercussions on the institutions of a Faith of such tender age whose teachings have a direct and vital bearing on each of these spheres of human life and conduct? (ADJ 2-3)

This did indeed affect the lives of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh as they found themselves in a maelstrom of "contending Passions" wherein their institutions were endangered while the very core of their belief system was under attack. In mid-Europe the Bahá'í community with its potential to "radiate the splendor of the light of the Faith on the countries that surround it" was stifled by the Nazi regime and its voice silenced.

The large Bahá'í community of 'Ishqábád, Turkistan in central Asia where the first Bahá'í Center and Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (House of Worship) had been built, was at the mercy of forces that, for decades were bent on reducing it to utter impotence. This culminated with the expropriation of its Temple by the Soviet Union concurrently with disbandment of its Spiritual Assemblies and the imprisonment of a number of the followers of the Faith.

In Iran where the vast majority of Bahá'ís lived and whose Capital, Tīhrán had been hailed by Bahá'u'lláh as "the mother of the world" and "the dayspring of the joy of mankind" there was a civil authority "as yet undivorced officially from the

paralyzing influences of an antiquated, a fanatical, and outrageously corrupt clergy." The fact was that the political collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1908 left the smoldering remains of a spiritually bankrupt priesthood as the only meaningful influence on the people of the Middle East, civil authority notwithstanding. And with the pathetic demise of the despicable, corrupt Qájár Dynasty of Iran in 1925, the vestigial remains of a once glorious civilization offered its final death rattle. The Guardian described the actions by this unholy symbiotic relationship of clergy and state as it relentlessly repressed the adherents of the Bahá'í Faith in the land of its birth.

Indifferent to the truth that the members of this innocent and proscribed community can justly claim to rank as among the most disinterested, the most competent, and the most ardent lovers of their native land...such an authority refuses to grant to a Faith which numerically outnumbers the adherents of either the Christian, the Jewish, or the Zoroastrian Faiths in that land, the necessary legal right to enforce its laws, to administer its affairs, to conduct its schools, to celebrate its festivals, to circulate its literature, to solemnize its rites, to erect its edifices, and to safeguard its endowments. (ADJ-4)

Concurrently, in the Holy Land, incidents of racial strife, terrorism and fratricide enflamed the animosities between Jew, Christian and Muslim alike. The rising tide of lawlessness endangered the neutral status of the Bahá'í community and interfered with its normal functions. Its very members were imperiled, as was the flow of Bahá'í pilgrims and yet the Bahá'í Holy places were miraculously preserved.

Shoghi Effendi then defined the world as being "torn with conflicting passions, and perilously disintegrating from within," but a world also confronted by an infant Faith that... "seems to be drawn into its controversies, entangled by its conflicts, eclipsed by its gathering shadows, and overpowered by the mounting tide of its passions." He further explained that within the heart of the cradle of "the as-yet unemancipated Faith of Bahá'u'lláh,.." the forces of violence were impelling its retreat. (ADJ-5)

The strongholds of such a Faith, one by one and day after day, are to outward seeming being successively isolated, assaulted and captured. As the lights of liberty flicker and

go out, as the din of discord grows louder and louder every day, as the fires of fanaticism flame with increasing fierceness in the breasts of men, as the chill of irreligion creeps relentlessly over the soul of mankind, the limbs and organs that constitute the body of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh appear, in varying measure, to have become afflicted with the crippling influences that now hold in their grip the whole of the civilized world. (ADJ-5)

He then quoted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's timely comment on the seriousness of the hour. "The darkness of error that has enveloped the East and the West is, in this most great cycle, battling with the light of Divine Guidance. Its swords and its spears are very sharp and pointed; its army keenly bloodthirsty." (ADJ-6)

And again:

*This day, the powers of all the leaders of religion are directed towards the dispersion of the congregation of the All-Merciful, and the shattering of the Divine Edifice. The hosts of the world, whether material, cultural or political are from every side launching their assault, for the Cause is great, very great. Its greatness is, in this day, clear and manifest to men's eyes.* (ADJ-6)

## Chief Remaining Citadel

In spite of these crises there was still an enduring hope for the embryonic Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi declared the Bahá'í community of North America to be the chief remaining citadel of the Faith and he further identified it as the cradle of the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. He reminded the doubters of the special spiritual destiny of America with a quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The continent of America is, in the eyes of the one true God, the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide, and the free assemble." (ADJ-6)

The Guardian observed that the North American believers had "shown its capacity to be recognized as the torchbearer of that light, the repository of those mysteries, the exponent of that righteousness and the sanctuary of that freedom." He then, with great honor, referred to the American believers as "the

spiritual descendants of the Dawn-Breakers of an heroic Age” who would usher in the New World Order, “the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter.” (ADJ-7)

He asked: What community other than the North American Bahá'ís had established the administrative institutions that would become so critical to the new Order? It had also, with consistency, resourcefulness, perseverance and fidelity extended the framework within which those nascent institutions could alone multiply and mature. The community was fired by noble vision to raise an edifice that could be regarded “as the greatest contribution ever made by the West to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh?” Furthermore, the community had secured the allegiance of Royalty with marvelous testimony. It had shown foresight, organizing ability in establishing schools “for the enrichment and consolidation of its teaching force.” (ADJ-8)

The community had produced pioneers with qualities of audacity, consecration, tenacity, and devotion that would forsake their all to “scatter over the surface of the globe, and hoist in its uttermost corners the triumphant banner of the Faith. They undertook the labor to exercise the patience, and to provide the funds required for the translation and publication of their sacred literature. It was the first Bahá'í community

to frame its national and local constitutions, thereby laying down the fundamental lines of the twin charters designed to regulate the activities, define the functions, and safeguard the rights, of its institutions.”(ADJ 9-10) It secured the basis of its national endowments, and obtained the necessary documents assuring the recognition of its Spiritual Assemblies.

And finally what other community has had the privilege, and been granted the means, to succor the needy, to plead the cause of the downtrodden, and to intervene so energetically for the safeguarding of Bahá'í edifices and institutions in countries such as Persia, Egypt, Iraq, Russia, and Germany, where, at various times, its fellow-believers have had to suffer the rigors of both religious and racial persecution? (ADJ-10)

Shoghi Effendi acknowledged the achievements of the American Bahá'í community during the previous two decades as deserving to rank “as a memorable chapter in the history of the Formative Period of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.” He commented

further that, great as had been the friends achievements, the tasks before them were far greater in magnitude than anything they had achieved in the past. History would bear out the truth of those words.

The Guardian described a "Crusade of still greater magnitude" with the explanation that the virtual establishment of the Administrative Order of their Faith was the first task for the American Bahá'ís called into being by the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They addressed themselves, with equal zest and consecration, to the next more arduous task of erecting the magnificent House of worship at the holiest spot in North America and then resolved to undertake yet another task--the Seven Year Plan, the first practical step towards the fulfillment of the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

The opening of the second century of the Bahá'í era was to include the formation of at least one center in each of the Republics of the Western Hemisphere. And most interesting was his declaration that the Plan espoused by 'Abdu'l-Bahá would, after perusal "instantly reveal a scope for their activities that stretches far beyond the confines of the Western Hemisphere."

The moment this Divine Message is carried forward by the American believers from the shores of America and is propagated through the continents of Europe, of Asia, of Africa, and of Australasia, and as far as the islands of the Pacific, this community will find itself securely established upon the throne of an everlasting dominion. (ADJ-13)

In effect then, The Tablets of the Divine Plan, addressed to the Bahá'ís of the U.S. and Canada, were ultimately intended to inspire the expansion of the Faith throughout the world. The believers in the west thus initiated the Seven Year Plan as decreed by Shoghi Effendi.

The Guardian then laid out a startling array of possibilities for the future of the American Bahá'ís, possibilities that far exceeded anything that they might have imagined. They were to erect the various dependencies of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the West, and to deal with the intricate issues involving the establishment and the extension of the structural basis of Bahá'í community life. They were to play a significant part in the election of the International House of Justice and its establishment in the Holy Land, and to help establish the spiritual and administrative center of the Bahá'í world, together

with the formation of its auxiliary branches and subsidiary institutions. They were to be vitally involved in the worldwide Bahá'í community efforts regarding the multitude of challenges facing that community. Listed was the codification and promulgation of the ordinances of the Most Holy Book, and the third Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the Bahá'í world in the outskirts of the city of Tíhrán. Also included were the precautionary and defensive measures to be devised, coordinated, and carried out to counteract the full force of the inescapable attacks that the organized efforts of ecclesiastical organizations of various denominations would progressively launch and relentlessly pursue. And they were to "enable a sore-tried Faith to pass through the successive stages of unmitigated obscurity, of active repression, and of complete emancipation." He further commented:

The challenge offered by these opportunities the American believers, I feel confident, will, in addition to their answer to the teaching call voiced by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Tablets, unhesitatingly take up, and will, with their traditional fearlessness, tenacity, and efficiency, so respond to it as to confirm, before all the world, their title and rank as the champion-builders of the mightiest institutions of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. (ADJ-15)

The believers were kindly encouraged to acknowledge the bounty spread before them and they were lovingly nourished in preparation for the arduous trials that would confront them in the dark days before WWII. He reminded them that His unfailing light was shining upon them with incomparable splendor.

Though small in numbers, and circumscribed as yet in your experiences, powers, and resources, yet the Force which energizes your mission is limitless in its range and incalculable in its potency. Though the enemies which every acceleration in the progress of your mission must raise up be fierce, numerous, and unrelenting, yet the invisible Hosts which, if you persevere, must, as promised, rush forth to your aid, will, in the end, enable you to vanquish their hopes and annihilate their forces. (ADJ 16)

The Guardian paused to emphasize the distinction between the North American believers and the people from which God had raised them up. It was important that they recognize the



impact of the transmuting power of Bahá'u'lláh on their lives. "Otherwise, the supreme and distinguishing function of His Revelation, which is none other than the calling into being of a new race of men, will remain wholly unrecognized and completely obscured." (ADJ-16)

## The Supreme Function Of His Revelation

The historical consistency of the appearance of the Great Prophets of God in times and places where man had sunk to the lowest levels of spiritual and moral degradation were noted. Examples were the Hebrews under the Pharaohs before Moses came to lead them to the Holy Land, the decline of the Jews when Christ appeared, the barbarity of Arabia when Muhammad arose and the decadence of Persia in the hour of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It was never the high moral standards nor the social attainments of any people that would initiate the appearance of a Divine Messenger.

For it is precisely under such circumstances, and by such means that the Prophets have, from time immemorial, chosen and were able to demonstrate their redemptive power to raise from the depths of abasement and of misery, the people of their own race and nation, empowering them to transmit in turn to other races and nations the saving grace and the energizing influence of their Revelation. (ADJ-18)

Persia had sunk to the lowest depths of perversity and thereby became the receptacle of the transforming power of the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Their regenerating spirit transformed "the most cowardly, and perverse of peoples into a race of heroes,.." It was untenable to maintain the belief that the excellence of Persia and the nobility of its people were the basic reasons for the appearance of the new Revelation. In a similar manner, but lesser extent, this principle would also apply to the country that would be designated as the cradle of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The United States, the country that would bear such an honor was not chosen because of its excellence or special merit.

It is precisely by reason of the patent evils which, notwithstanding its other admittedly great characteristics and achievements, an excessive and binding materialism has unfortunately engendered within it that the Author of their Faith and the Center of His Covenant have singled it out to become the

standard-bearer of the New World Order envisaged in their writings. (ADJ-19)

Shoghi Effendi declared that this was the best way that Bahá'u'lláh could demonstrate His power to raise up men and women who were "immersed in a sea of materialism, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards," to become the champions of moral rectitude and indiscriminating fellowship. This would be prerequisite to their call to bring into being the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh and a new world civilization.

He pondered the staggering responsibility that would be born by the young, inexperienced American believers in their efforts to weed out the faults and habits derived from their own nation while cultivating the characteristics so necessary to their participation in the work of their Faith. He further stressed what he felt were the essential requirements for the work that would demand the undivided attention of the North American believers.

## Spiritual Prerequisites

The first of these spiritual prerequisites was defined as a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities. This would particularly apply to their elected representatives at all levels of administration. The second would primarily concern Bahá'í youth who must all observe chastity in their individual lives. The third would require that all members of the Bahá'í community be free of prejudice of any kind. The Guardian strongly reaffirmed these points.

A rectitude of conduct, an abiding sense of undeviating justice, unobscured by the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests; a chaste, pure, and holy life, unsullied and unclouded by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters; a fraternity freed from that cancerous growth of racial prejudice, which is eating into the vitals of an already debilitated society -- these are the ideals which the American believers must, from now on, individually and through concerted action, strive to promote,... (ADJ-23)

Shoghi Effendi called upon the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá extensively in the effort to unequivocally

emphasize the importance of the rectitude of conduct that all Bahá'ís must observe. Following are a few admonitions:

The companions of God are, in this day, the lump that must leaven the peoples of the world. They must show forth such trustworthiness, such truthfulness and perseverance, such deeds and character that all mankind may profit by their example. I swear by Him Who is the Most Great Ocean! 'Within the very breath of such souls as are pure and sanctified far-reaching potentialities are hidden. So great are these potentialities that they exercise their influence upon all created things. (ADJ 23)

Again from Bahá'u'lláh an explanation of purpose:

*The purpose of the one true God in manifesting Himself is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the will of God, to forbearance and kindness, to uprightness and wisdom. His object is to array every man with the mantle of a saintly character, and to adorn him with the ornament of holy and goodly deeds. (GWB 299)*

Also He warns:

*Beware, O people of Bahá, lest ye walk in the ways of them whose words differ from their deeds. Strive that ye may be enabled to manifest to the peoples of the earth the signs of God, and to mirror forth His commandments. Let your acts be a guide unto all mankind, for the professions of most men, be they high or low, differ from their conduct. It is through your deeds that ye can distinguish yourselves from others. Through them the brightness of your light can be shed upon the whole earth. Happy is the man that heedeth My counsel, and keepeth the precepts prescribed by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. (GWB 305)*

And 'Abdu'l-Bahá counseled the believers:

*Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a center of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world, so that the people of that city may cry out and say: 'This man is unquestionably a Bahá'í, for his*

*manners, his behavior, his conduct, his morals, his nature, and disposition reflect the attributes of the Bahá'ís. Not until ye attain this station can ye be said to have been faithful to the Covenant and Testament of God...The most vital duty, in this day is to purify your characters, to correct your manners, and improve your conduct. (BWF-401)*

He further asserted: "Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues." Bahá'ís embrace this for without it, progress for the soul is impossible in any of the worlds of God! Shoghi Effendi elaborated on the potency of such conduct in the actions of elected representatives, and of participants in business dealings. The same should be true in domestic matters and in service. In fact, all human conduct should be in compliance with the Most Holy, the Book of Laws. Such rectitude of conduct at all levels of Bahá'í life constitutes the transcendental principle of Divine Justice "that must be regarded as the crowning distinction of all Local and National Assemblies, in their capacity as forerunners of the Universal House of Justice..." (ADJ-27) This concept is then supported by numerous quotes from the writings of the Faith followed by this statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

God be praised! The sun of justice hath risen above the horizon of Bahá'u'lláh. For in His Tablets the foundations of such a justice have been laid as no mind hath, from the beginning of creation, conceived. The canopy of existence resteth upon the pole of justice, and not of forgiveness, and the life of mankind dependeth on justice and not on forgiveness. (ADJ-28)

The implications of modesty, temperance and decency require moderation in all the things that we do, according to the Guardian. Spiritual prerequisites are restated:

It requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs. It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature, the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices. It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the

perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses. (ADJ-30)

## The Most Challenging Issue

The Guardian identified racial prejudice as the most challenging issue facing the American Bahá'í community. He referred to it as a corrosion that had bitten into the fiber of American society. He declared that it would take ceaseless efforts in sacrifice, vigilance, moral courage and fortitude to resolve this issue of paramount importance. And he appealed to both white and Negro alike who identify with the Bahá'í Faith, to participate and lend assistance to the task of fulfilling the instructions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He admonished them to follow the examples set by Him, "Let them remember His courage, His genuine love, His informal and indiscriminating fellowship, His contempt for and impatience of criticism, tempered by His tact and wisdom." He further stated:

To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh...Freedom from racial prejudice, in any of its forms, should, at such a time as this when an increasingly large section of the human race is falling a victim to its devastating ferocity, be adopted as the watchword of the entire body of the American believers, in whichever state they reside, in whatever circles they move, whatever their age, traditions, tastes, and habits. (ADJ-35)

He appealed to white friends to resolve to contribute their share to the solution of racism and to abandon any sense of superiority and to avoid a patronizing attitude. Most importantly a genuine friendship and sincerity of intentions is required in dealing with a people who have suffered "such grievous and slow-healing wounds." He then admonished the Negroes to make a corresponding effort to forget the past, to show their power of warmth and to wipe out any trace of suspicion. Neither should assume that the solution to such problems is exclusively the responsibility of the other.

## Their Double Crusade

Shoghi Effendi again emphasized the rectitude of conduct and declared it to be the primary weapon that the American believers must wield in their double crusade of regenerating the

inner life of the Bahá'í community and of assailing the evils that remained entrenched in the life of their nation. The perfecting of such weapons was far more important than the development of any particular plan. More than anything else, this would prepare them to bring into operation that "World Order which was incubating within the worldwide administrative institutions of their Faith."

In the conduct of this twofold crusade the valiant warriors struggling in the name and for the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh must, of necessity, encounter stiff resistance, and suffer many a setback. Their own instincts, no less than the fury of conservative forces, the opposition of vested interests, and the objections of a corrupt and pleasure-seeking generation, must be reckoned with, resolutely resisted, and completely overcome. (ADJ-41)

He pleaded that the Bahá'ís in the west be not afraid of criticism for it is a voice that indirectly reinforces the proclamation of the Cause. But to effect a spiritual transformation in the multitudes of the hungry, restless and un-shepherded requires that the agency by which the message of Bahá'u'lláh is imparted be free of the defilements that it seeks to remove!

It was the Seven Year Plan that would occupy the believers time and thought in the ornamentation of the Temple in Wilmette, Illinois and the expansion of teaching efforts in North and South America. The Temple stood on the holiest spot in the western hemisphere and its completion would, in time, have a profound effect as a "silent teacher" in the Cradle of the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith. The teaching goal was to have at least one local spiritual assembly in every state of the United States and every province in Canada. Also, one Bahá'í center was to be created in each Latin American Republic.

## The Teaching Requirements

At this juncture, Shoghi Effendi felt compelled to clarify the purpose of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the West "as no more than an instrument for a more effective propagation of the Cause..." over and above its beauty and the ideals that it symbolized. In addition, the teaching requirements of the Seven Year Plan would include the sustained attention of the entire Bahá'í community in spite of any limited experience. Teaching was not to be the sole domain of the administrative institutions.

The field is indeed so immense, the period so critical, the Cause so great, the workers so few, the time so short, the privilege so priceless, that no follower of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, worthy to bear His name, can afford a moment's hesitation... That God-born Force, irresistible in its sweeping power, incalculable in its potency, unpredictable in its course, mysterious in its workings, and awe-inspiring in its manifestations...is, under our very eyes, sundering, on the one hand, the age-old ties which for centuries have held together the fabric of civilized society, and is unloosing, on the other, the bonds that still fetter the infant and as yet unemancipated Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. (ADJ-46)

The Guardian intimated that such extraordinary circumstances to spread the knowledge of their Faith might not recur again. Moreover, the importance of the teaching campaign in Canada and throughout the United States could not be overestimated. And he felt that it must follow certain principles to attain its objective.

First, the believers were to thoroughly familiarize themselves with the history and teachings of the Faith, the station of its Forerunner, the Báb and the laws revealed by its Author, Bahá'u'lláh. To do so would require conscientious study of its literature and assimilation of its laws and principles. It would also require memorization of prayers and exhortations. It would be necessary to master the essentials of its administration and to keep abreast of current affairs and latest developments.

Following this, they were to familiarize themselves with the languages of Latin America as well as the three great Island groups in the Pacific Ocean. He advised the teaching pioneers, with an admonition from Bahá'u'lláh: "Be unrestrained as the wind," The Guardian further added:

No participator in this inter-American campaign of teaching must feel that the initiative for any particular activity connected with this work must rest solely with those agencies, whether Assemblies or committees, whose special concern is to promote and facilitate the attainment of this vital objective of the Seven Year Plan. It is the bounden duty of every American believer, as the faithful trustee of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, to initiate, promote, and consolidate, within the limits fixed by the administrative principles of the Faith, any activity he or she deems fit to undertake for the furtherance of the Plan.

(ADJ 50)

Shoghi Effendi then suggests a wide variety of approaches to teaching depending upon the characteristics of a given culture yet all the while safeguarding the integrity of the Faith. Then he emphasized how important the spirit of teaching should be:

Let him remember the example set by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and His constant admonition to shower such kindness upon the seeker, and exemplify to such a degree the spirit of the teachings he hopes to instill into him, that the recipient will be spontaneously impelled to identify himself with the Cause embodying such teachings. (ADJ 52)

Yet, Shoghi Effendi tempered the afore mentioned flexibility with the following guidelines.

Let every participator in the continent-wide campaign initiated by the American believers, and particularly those engaged in pioneer work in virgin territories, bear in mind the necessity of keeping in close and constant touch with those responsible agencies designed to direct, coordinate, and facilitate the teaching activities of the entire community. (ADJ 52)

The Guardian unequivocally placed the mandate of teaching upon every participant in the Seven Year Plan with the caveat that it be “the all-pervading concern of his life.” This would apply to “all the republics, classes and denominations of the entire Western Hemisphere.”

## The Awakening Of Latin America

The next step for the North American Bahá'ís in their initiation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan was to set in motion a tremendous exertion to assist a few isolated believers in their efforts to awaken the nations of South America to the call of Bahá'u'lláh. This second phase of the Seven Year Plan would have to be entered before it could be considered as fully launched. And they were assured of the effusions of Divine Grace that would be poured upon them with overwhelming evidences of their regenerative power.

Central and South America embraced twenty independent nations equaling one third of the sovereign states at the time and would play “an increasingly important part in the shaping of the world's future destiny.” Shoghi Effendi then exuded one his inspiring appeals to the Bahá'í community of North



## America:

Let some, at this very moment, gird up the loins of their endeavor, flee their native towns, cities, and states, forsake their country, and, "putting their whole trust in God as the best provision for their journey," set their faces, and direct their steps towards those distant climes, those virgin fields, those unsundered cities, and bend their energies to capture the citadels of men's hearts -- hearts, which, as Bahá'u'lláh has written, "the hosts of Revelation and of utterance can subdue." Let them not tarry until such time as their fellow-laborers will have passed the first stage in their campaign of teaching, but let them rather, from this very hour, arise to usher in the opening phase of what will come to be regarded as one of the most glorious chapters in the international history of their Faith.(ADJ 59)

His appeal then relied upon the call of Bahá'u'lláh:

*O wayfarer in the path of God! Take thou thy portion of the ocean of His grace, and deprive not thyself of the things that lie hidden in its depths.... A dewdrop out of this ocean would, if shed upon all that are in the heavens and on earth, suffice to enrich them with the bounty of God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. With the hands of renunciation draw forth from its life-giving waters, and sprinkle therewith all created things, that they may be cleansed from all man-made limitations, and may approach the mighty seat of God, this hallowed and resplendent Spot. Be not grieved if thou performest it thyself alone. Let God be all-sufficient for thee... (GWB 279)*

Following this were the inspiring words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*O ye apostles of Bahá'u'lláh! May my life be sacrificed for you!... Behold the portals which Bahá'u'lláh hath opened before you! Consider how exalted and lofty is the station you are destined to attain; how unique the favors with which you have been endowed...My thoughts are turned towards you, and my heart leaps within me at your mention. Could ye know how my soul gloweth with your love, so great a happiness would flood your hearts as to cause you to become enamored with each other...The full measure of your success is as yet unrevealed, its significance still unapprehended. (BWF 423)*

The goal was to establish in each Latin American country at least one Bahá'í center by the hundredth anniversary (22 May,

1944) of the birth of the Faith. This would provide the foundation upon which the North American believers could build, in Central and South America, the Administrative Order during the opening years of the second century of the Bahá'í era.

The object was to establish a necessary foundation, to pave the way in a systematic manner of the laying of the basis for the permanent national and local Bahá'í institutions in Latin America. Further, the campaign would initiate the revealing of essential stages the American believers were to play in the worldwide propagation of their Cause. Ultimately, it would be the believers in Latin countries that would distinguish themselves but first it would require the sending of settlers and itinerant teachers "to raise the call of the New Day in a new continent."

All manner of support and resources were to be provided the pioneers including properly translated literature and appropriate publicity for its distribution. The teachers were to mix in a friendly manner, with all sections of the population regardless of creed or color. They were to patiently endeavor to implant such love and devotion in their hearts of the few who were receptive to enable them to become self-sufficient promoters of the Faith in their localities. But they were also advised to exercise care so that their efforts would not be misconstrued to be proselytizing.

In his appeal for pioneers, the Guardian particularly addressed the American believers who were able to establish permanent residence in Latin countries by establishing their own means of livelihood. This would greatly relieve the pressure on the Teaching Fund while allowing them to partake of the sacred privilege of carrying out so noble an enterprise. For those who were unable to go should appoint and support one who could.

Shoghi Effendi was especially grateful to the "Handmaidens of God" who had, since the inception of the Faith, opened up so many diversified countries around the globe. They, more than the men, had boldly moved forward in the selfless act of teaching at all levels.

A special appeal was made to the Bahá'í youth to exercise their adventurous spirit and vigor in arousing the interest of their fellow youth in the Faith. Though inexperienced, it would be their optimism and alertness that would animate them to fulfill their potential in service to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

He then made special note of Panama, observing that the unique geographical position of Panama endowed it with great importance in connecting the North American Bahá'í communities to the Central American States as well as to the South American Continent. In like manner it was noted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that it connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific through the Canal and would thus provide significant traffic that would allow the Faith to unite the East and West. Teaching in Panama would therefore have great importance because a strong Bahá'í community in Panama would provide a key matrix from which the Faith could spread North to South and East to West.

The Guardian recalled the vision set by the Seven Year Plan as a vast functional priority facing the American believers and called upon them to not let strife and confusion befog their own vision. Upheavals should never deflect their course nor should denunciations sap their loyalty. Reliance on God's all compelling Will would always be their pillar and guide.

Far from yielding in their resolve, far from growing oblivious of their task, they should, at no time, however much buffeted by circumstances, forget that the synchronization of such world-shaking crises with the progressive unfoldment and fruition of their divinely appointed task is itself the work of Providence, the design of an inscrutable Wisdom, and the purpose of an all-compelling Will, a Will that directs and controls, in its own mysterious way, both the fortunes of the Faith and the destinies of men. (ADJ 72)

The Seven Year Plan was but an initial stage in a far greater Plan as delineated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and authored by Bahá'u'lláh. Reflections on these aspects would steel the resolve of the American Bahá'í community and would dissipate their forebodings regarding the ultimate objective of unity for the entire planet.

## The Advent of The Kingdom

The Guardian noted a valuable insight offered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*The full measure of your success is as yet unrevealed, its significance still unapprehended. Ere long, ye will, with your own eyes, witness how brilliantly every one of you, even as a shining star, will radiate, in the firmament of*

*your country, the light of Divine Guidance, and will bestow upon its people the glory of an everlasting life.... The range of your future achievements still remains undisclosed. (TDP 39)*

It was His hope that the success attending their efforts in the Americas would carry over to the rest of the world. Following this, the advent of the Kingdom of the Lord would be proclaimed in all inhabited continents of the globe. The positive consequences of this would be very great for the American Bahá'ís because they would then be recognized as spiritually illumined and divinely guided. But to rest on such laurels would be tantamount to betrayal of the trust placed upon them by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a trust that Shoghi Effendi reassured us would never be broken. The Guardian then reinforced this with copious utterances gleaned from the untranslated reservoir of Bahá'u'lláh's billowing words, a few of which follow:

*Cling ye to the Cord of steadfastness, in such wise that all vain imaginings may utterly vanish. Speed ye forth from the horizon of power, in the name of your Lord, the Unconstrained, and announce unto His servants, with wisdom and eloquence, the tidings of this Cause, whose splendor hath been shed upon the world of being. Beware lest anything withhold you from observing the things prescribed unto you by the Pen of Glory, as it moved over His Tablet with sovereign majesty and might. Great is the blessedness of him that hath hearkened to its shrill voice, as it was raised, through the power of truth, before all who are in heaven and all who are on earth.... O people of Bahá! The river that is Life indeed hath flowed for your sakes. Quaff ye in My name, despite them that have disbelieved in God, the Lord of Revelation. (ADJ 76)*

He continues describing deeper aspects of His Cause:

*Verily I say! No one hath apprehended the root of this Cause. It is incumbent upon everyone, in this day, to perceive with the eye of God, and to hearken with His ear. Whoso beholdeth Me with an eye besides Mine own will never be able to know Me. None among the Manifestations of old, except to a prescribed degree, hath ever completely apprehended the nature of this Revelation. I testify before God to the greatness, the inconceivable greatness of this Revelation. Again and again have We, in most of Our Tablets, borne witness to this truth, that mankind may be roused from its*

*heedlessness.* (ADJ 77)

These quotes of Bahá'u'lláh as used by the Guardian not only inspired the pioneers but also further educated the embryonic community of American Bahá'is in the verities of the Faith.

*This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things.... This is the Day whereon the Ocean of God's mercy hath been manifested unto men, the Day in which the Daystar of His loving-kindness hath shed its radiance upon them, the Day in which the clouds of His bountiful favor have overshadowed the whole of mankind.* (GWB 6)

The window of opportunity to teach in virgin lands had never been greater and every effort was precious to the Cause as characterized by Bahá'u'lláh:

*This Day a door is open wider than both heaven and earth. The eye of the mercy of Him Who is the Desire of the worlds is turned towards all men. An act, however infinitesimal, is, when viewed in the mirror of the knowledge of God, mightier than a mountain. Every drop proffered in His path is as the sea in that mirror. For this is the Day which the one true God, glorified be He, hath announced in all His Books, unto His Prophets and His Messengers.* (ADJ 78)

A regenerating energy was showered upon the believers by Bahá'u'lláh's words, which would serve as a balm to them when faced with enormous challenges in fulfilling the Seven Year Plan.

*Through the movement of Our Pen of Glory We have, at the bidding of the Omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency. All created things proclaim the evidences of this worldwide regeneration. O people! I swear by the one true God! This is the Ocean out of which all Seas have proceeded, and with which every one of them will ultimately be united.* (GWB 92)

These were but a few of the extraordinary utterances by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá that were previously unavailable to the Bahá'is. Shoghi Effendi finally referred to what he called "some of the most momentous and thought-provoking pronouncements ever made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the course of

His epoch-making travels in the North American continent....”

*May this American Democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the Standard of the Most Great Peace... The American people are indeed worthy of being the first to build the Tabernacle of the Great Peace, and proclaim the oneness of mankind.... For America hath developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations.... The American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people....The American continent gives signs and evidences of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually. (PUP 36)*

## The Destiny Of America

As a literary convenience, the Guardian would often interchange the terms ‘nation’ and ‘American’ when addressing the Cradle of the Administrative order of Bahá’u’lláh, specifically the United States of America and when doing so there were three things that he brought to bear regarding the future of that embryonic order. First, the nation was endowed with the worthiness to play the part envisioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It was the recipient of spiritual capacities of which a God-given mission had fused into its people and which were even then being manifested through the teaching efforts of the Bahá’ís. Second, the orientation of that nation was inexplicably gravitating toward policies and associations that would put it on the course of its true destiny as a result of the creative energies generated by the first stirrings of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. Third, the world was rapidly moving toward a conflict of ominous proportions and “the Great Republic of the West” was being reluctantly drawn into its vortex. Shoghi Effendi recognized the significance of these events within the prophetic utterances of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

The world is contracting into a neighborhood. America, willingly or unwillingly, must face and grapple with this new situation. For purposes of national security, let alone any humanitarian motive, she must assume the obligations imposed by this newly created neighborhood. Paradoxical

as it may seem, her only hope of extricating herself from the perils gathering around her is to become entangled in that very web of international association which the Hand of an inscrutable Providence is weaving. (ADJ-59)

The populace, except for the small community of believers did not recognize the Hand that directed their destiny. Yet the activities of both groups were contributing to the fulfillment of the promises voiced by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Concurrently the world had become an armed camp as religion's light was diminishing and moral authority was disintegrating. The words of Bahá'u'lláh in the 1870s echoed a still fresh concern: "The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned...." (GWB-216) And, soon after the termination of the first World War, 'Abdu'l-Bahá prophesied:

*The ills from which the world now suffers will multiply; the gloom, which envelops it, will deepen. The Balkans will remain discontented. Its restlessness will increase. The vanquished Powers will continue to agitate. They will resort to every measure that may rekindle the flame of war. Movements, newly born and worldwide in their range, will exert their utmost for the advancement of their designs. The Movement of the Left will acquire great importance. Its influence will spread.* (ADJ-88)

The clear, emphatic voice of President Franklin Roosevelt warned that attack was very possible due to the advanced development of military aircraft and by other factors. The Secretary of State said "These resurgent forces loom threateningly throughout the world -- their ominous shadow falls athwart our own Hemisphere..." And in the American press: "We must mount vigilant guard over the Western Hemisphere." (ADJ-89)

Meanwhile, Shoghi Effendi noted the significant distance that the nation had traveled since its formal repudiation of the Wilsonian ideal (League of Nations) and found it to be highly encouraging. He pondered the future possible relationships between the Western republics and the affairs of the world under the impact of international crises with respect to the ultimate destiny of America. However, he emphasized that nothing could alter the eventual course ordained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Tablets of The Divine Plan*.

The Guardian further surmised that the impending perplexities afflicting humanity would bode darkly for America but that she would emerge determined to bring the full weight of its influence “to exorcise forever, in conjunction with its sister nations of both the East and the West, the greatest curse which, from time immemorial, has afflicted and degraded the human race.” It was felt that America would become purified from the crucible of a common war and would be disciplined, even molded by its lessons. Only then would it be positioned to “lay the cornerstone of a universal and enduring peace, proclaim the solidarity, the unity, and maturity of mankind, and assist in the establishment of the promised reign of righteousness on earth.” (ADJ 90-91)

Then, and only then, will the American nation, while the community of the American believers within its heart is consummating its divinely appointed mission, be able to fulfill the unspeakably glorious destiny ordained for it by the Almighty, and immortally enshrined in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Then, and only then, will the American nation accomplish “that which will adorn the pages of history, become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West.” (ADJ-91)

This last quotation concluded his communication and was signed “SHOGHI” on Christmas Day, 1938. Now, with the benefit of seven decades of hindsight it is astonishing to observe the accuracy and insight expressed in the writings of the Guardian when comparing his views to the historical events that ensued after his remarkable utterances regarding the human condition in the late 1930s.

## In Summary

The first vital issue under question in *The Advent of Divine Justice* mentioned earlier involved the Guardian educating the Western Bahá'ís in the verities of their Faith by immersing them in certain of its writings regarding the overriding principles, virtues and administrative requirements that would armor them in dealing with the travails of a disintegrating age. In the second issue, he identified the most challenging spiritual barriers they would face and the methods they would need to employ in achieving success of the ambitious Seven Year Plan for teaching the Faith in the Americas. Moreover, this would open the door for worldwide expansion. Indeed, the future of the Faith was in their hands as America was declared to be its Chief Remaining



Citadel. Regarding the third vital issue, that is Justice, the Guardian explained in his inimitable way that the infusion of laws and principles annunciated by Bahá'u'lláh within the rectitude of conduct at all levels of Bahá'í community life literally defined the transcendental principle of Divine Justice. Thus a concept of justice that had never been acknowledged before was born in those initial stages of the Divine Plan. He declared this to be the "crowning distinction of all Local and National Assemblies." (ADJ-27) Of the fourth issue, Shoghi Effendi surmised that America would be purified and molded by the impending conflicts of world conflagration in a way that would prepare her to lay the cornerstone of universal peace. Its Bahá'í members were honored with the designation as the Spiritual Descendants of the Dawn Breakers and the country was given the high honor of being the Cradle of the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most subtle and enduring of these issues under discussion is the notion of Divine Justice. With it, Justice has reached an unprecedented plateau for it will henceforth embody the spiritual characteristics that are so necessary for the advancement of civilization. With it, the scourge of war will be obliterated from the planet as will the most challenging issue of racism. Such a perspective was previously augmented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as noted by Shoghi Effendi: "The continuance of mankind depends upon justice and not upon forgiveness." (SAQ-270) This infers that justice is earned whereas forgiveness is acquired by grace but grace alone will not suffice the rigors and complexities of the modern age. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment..." (GWB-219) He also exalts the spiritual ramifications of this concept when, speaking with the voice of God, He says "The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice...By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others...Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes." (HWB-3)

Finally, we can say with full conviction that the theory of justice, which traditionally has tended to parallel the prevailing range of ethical and political philosophy, now is embraced by a profound new paradigm of spiritual parameters.

# **Elucidations**

## **The Resurrection and Return of Jesus**

### **M E M O R A N D U M**

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 9 October 1989

From: The Research Department

## **The Resurrection and Return of Jesus**

In her letter dated ... to the Research Department, ... requests explanations of the Resurrection and return of Jesus. She has read the relevant interpretations in "Some Answered Questions" and "The Wine of Astonishment", yet feels that her understanding is not sufficient to satisfy her Christian friends. The Research Department provides the following.

### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

...s Christian friends challenged the truth of Bahá'u'lláh by the following argument:

Where are Jesus Christ's remains compared to Bahá'u'lláh's? Christ was God, that is why his remains disappeared. Bahá'u'lláh's remains are still here so he can't be God.

...then summarizes the issue by asking, "Why did Christ's body disappear and Bahá'u'lláh's didn't?"

...s friends regard the Resurrection of Christ and His Ascension into heaven as physical events involving His physical body, whereas the Bahá'í writings explain that these accounts should be interpreted symbolically. The general issue of symbolism in the Bible is treated in great detail by Bahá'u'lláh in the "Kitáb-i-Şqán" and on page 49 of that book [rev. ed.], (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), Bahá'u'lláh explains the purpose of symbolism in all the Holy Books:

Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic

terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time immemorial such hath been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books.

In the days when the New Testament was written, and for many centuries thereafter, the accepted concept of creation was that the world in which we live was at the centre of the physical universe, hell was literally below the earth, while heaven was literally above the clouds, beyond the spheres of the planets. To the people of those times there was nothing absurd in a literal understanding of the "harrowing of hell" (Jesus's descent into hell to bring up the souls of the virtuous of past ages) or of His physical ascent into heaven.

At the time of Jesus the ideas of the people about the next life were very vague, whether they were Jews or pagans. Even though they may have thought of the next world as a physical location to which the spirit went, they conceived of the life there as a shadowy, unreal, pale reflection of reality. Jesus was able to teach them that the next life is as real as, indeed even more "real" than, this life; it is not surprising, therefore, that Christian tradition over the centuries should have "concretized" what were meant to be spiritual teachings.

Nowadays, when we have a clearer understanding of the nature of the physical universe, the idea of a physical body descending to the heart of the earth, or ascending beyond the stratosphere (except in a spaceship) is a ridiculous impossibility. The Bahá'í teachings make it clear, however, that even though we cannot accept these accounts as literally true, this does not lessen the truth or importance of the spiritual realities that they convey.

Moreover, if one reads the biblical accounts with an unbiased mind, one can see that the events related are far from typical of a physical body. It is true that Jesus tells doubting Thomas to feel His wounds to demonstrate that it was really He, but just before that He had suddenly appeared in a room with locked doors. In a similar manner, after speaking with two followers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus suddenly disappears. He also appears suddenly in different parts of the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, Galilee, and so forth.

In this context we must remember St. Paul's statement in I Corinthians 15:50-54:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

From this it is clear that, even in Christian thought, it is the spiritual that is vital and eternal, not the material. The ways in which Christian theologians have interpreted and understood these teachings vary, but the essential elements are in accord both with Bahá'í teaching and with the accounts that we read in the New Testament.

In discussing these matters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in "Some Answered Questions", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), pp. 103-4, points out that Jesus states that He "came down from heaven", whereas it is known that from a physical point of view He was born as a baby in this material world. Thus His "descent" from "heaven" was a spiritual event, and "likewise His ascension to heaven is a spiritual and not material ascension".

Concerning the location of the burial site of Jesus' sacred remains, a letter dated 22 March 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer states:

Pilgrims have recorded in their notes oral statements made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi to the effect that the disciples hid the body of Christ by burying it under the wall of Jerusalem, and that it is now under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The House of Justice knows of nothing in the Writings of the Faith, however, explicitly confirming these statements.

## **The Return of Jesus**

...poses a second question: "Why did Christ explain His second coming with such detail in the book of Revelations if it were all symbolical?" The "Kitáb-i-Şqán" identifies Christ's

explanation concerning His return as symbolical and elucidates the meanings behind the symbolism. Regarding Christ's second coming, this subject is also explained in the "Kitáb-i-Şqán", and in chapters 26 and 33 of "Some Answered Questions", which deal with Christ's return and the subject of "return" in general.

A letter dated 29 November 1937 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer identifies the fulfilment of Christ's prophecy of His return -- of the coming of the Kingdom of the Father -- with the worldwide realization of the sovereignty of Bahá'u'lláh:

Now as regards the signs that would herald the advent of the new Manifestation; The Guardian wishes you to read over very carefully Bahá'u'lláh's explanation as recorded in the Şqán". There it is made clear that what is meant by the appearance of the Son of God after the calamitous events preceding His coming is the revelation of His full glory and its recognition and acceptance by the peoples of the world, and not His physical appearance. For Bahá'u'lláh, Whose advent marks the return of the Son in the glory of the Father, has already appeared, and the signs predicted in the Gospel have not yet fully been realized. Their complete fulfilment, however, would mark the beginning of the recognition of His full station by the peoples of the world. Then and only then will His appearance be made completely manifest.

### **Explaining the Bahá'í View to Christians**

It is in the nature of such symbolic terms as "resurrection" and "return" that differing views concerning their meaning develop. Indeed, there are differences among Christian scholars themselves regarding the Resurrection of Christ, as the "Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions" (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1981) points out on page 619: "A number of Christian theologians today regard resurrection as a metaphor which expresses the conviction that the whole self has a future beyond death, but others reaffirm the importance of the traditional belief that Jesus' body was raised from death."

In light of the ongoing discussion within Christian theological circles, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to adduce a "proof" of the Bahá'í understanding of Christ's resurrection which would be acceptable to all Christians. The Research Department suggests that it would be

more fruitful to focus on such points of agreement as are outlined by the beloved Guardian on page 109 of "The Promised Day Is Come", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980):

As to the position of Christianity, let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that its divine origin is unconditionally acknowledged, that the Son ship and Divinity of Jesus Christ are fearlessly asserted, that the divine inspiration of the Gospel is fully recognized, that the reality of the mystery of the Immaculacy of the Virgin Mary is confessed, and the primacy of Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, is upheld and defended....

# Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith

14 November 2005

Transmitted by email

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Recently, questions have arisen which have prompted the Universal House of Justice to comment further on matters treated in the compilation "Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith".

The Bahá'í principle calling for investigation of reality encourages an unfettered search for knowledge and truth by whoever wishes to engage in it. When applied to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, it inevitably gives rise to a wide range of responses. Some, attracted to the Message, embrace the Cause as their own. Some may respond positively to certain precepts or principles and willingly collaborate toward shared aims. Some may find it to be an interesting social phenomenon worthy of study. Still others, content with their own beliefs, may reject its claims. Bahá'ís are taught to be respectful of the views of others, believing that conscience should not be coerced.

Upon becoming a Bahá'í, one accepts certain fundamental beliefs; but invariably one's knowledge of the Teachings is limited and often mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that "an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds." Over time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live a Bahá'í life, immature ideas yield to a more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the meaning of the Text is clarified as one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the discourse of the Bahá'í community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence

of the individual, be allowed to bring about disputes and arguments among the friends; personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice on "problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book".

In searching for understanding, Bahá'ís naturally acquaint themselves with published materials from a variety of sources. A book written by disinterested non-Bahá'í scholar about the Faith, even if it reflects certain assumptions and puts forward conclusions acceptable within a given discipline but which are at variance with Bahá'í belief, poses no particular problem for Bahá'ís, who would regard these perceptions as an honest attempt to explore a religious phenomenon as yet little understood generally. Any non-biased effort to make the Faith comprehensible to a thoughtful readership, however inadequate it might appear, would evoke genuine Bahá'í appreciation for the perspective offered and research skill invested in the project. The matter is wholly different, however, when someone intentionally attacks the Faith. An inescapable duty devolves upon the friends so to situate themselves in the knowledge of the Teachings as to be able to respond appropriately to such a challenge as it arises and thus uphold the integrity of the Faith.

The words of Bahá'u'lláh Himself shed light on the proper attitude to adopt. He warns the believers "not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men". "Let them", He instructs, "rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. Those men, however, who, in this Day, have been led to assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God, are to be treated differently. It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God."

A different type of challenge arises when an individual or group, using the privilege of Bahá'í membership, adopts various means to impose personal views or an ideological agenda on the Bahá'í community. In one recent instance, for example, an individual has declared himself a "Bahá'í theologian, writing from and for a religious community," whose aim is "to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahá'í



community, to enable Bahá'ís to understand their relatively new Faith and to see what it can offer the world". Assertions of this kind go far beyond expressions of personal opinion, which any Bahá'í is free to voice. As illustrated, here is a claim that lies well outside the framework of Bahá'í belief and practice. Bahá'u'lláh has liberated human minds by prohibiting within His Faith any caste with ecclesiastical prerogatives that seeks to foist a self-assumed authority upon the thought and behaviour of the mass of believers. Indeed, He has prescribed a system that combines democratic practices with the application of knowledge through consultative processes.

The House of Justice is confident that the principles herein presented will enable the friends to benefit from diverse contributions resulting from exploration of the manifold implications of Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation, while remaining impervious to the efforts of those few who, whether in an explicit or veiled manner, attempt to divert the Bahá'í community from essential understandings of the Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre

# Appendix I

## Bibliography of the Bahá'í Writings and Their abbreviations used in this book\*

- ABL** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, Commemorative ed. London, UK: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987
- ADJ** Shoghi Effendi. *Advent of Divine Justice*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990
- ADP** Abdu'l-Bahá. *Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*. Comp. Elizabeth Fraser Chamberlain. Boston, MA: Tudor Press, 1918
- BA** Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922 – 1932, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1984
- BP** compilation. *Bahá'í Prayers*
- BW** World Centre Publications. *Bahá'í World, The*, volumes I (1925) through XX (1986-92); new series 1993-2007. Haifa: World Centre Publications.
- BWF** compilation. *Bahá'í World Faith*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976
- CUHJ** The Constitution of The Universal House of Justice. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1972
- CC** *Compilation of Compilations* volumes I-3. World Centre Publications / Bahá'í Publications Australia. Vol. 1-2: 1991; Vol. 3: 1993
- CF** Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith. Messages to America, 1947-1957*. Wilmette: Illinois, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965.
- ESW** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988
- FWU** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Foundations of World Unity*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979
- GPB** Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- GWB** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983
- HW** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Marzieh Gail. *Hidden Words*. Numerous editions
- KA** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi and the Bahá'í World Centre. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- KI** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983
- KJV** King James Version, The Bible. Numerous editions
- LDG** Shoghi Effendi. *Lights of Divine Guidance*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Germany, 1982
- LG** compilation. *Lights of Guidance*. India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- MBW** Shoghi Effendi. *Messages to the Bahá'í World: 1950-1957*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1971
- MSEI** Messages of Shoghi Effendi to the Indian Subcontinent
- MUHJ63** Universal House of Justice, comp. Geoffrey W. Marks. *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-86: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996
- OCF** Bahá'u'lláh, comp. Research Department of the UHJ. *One Common Faith*. Bahá'í World Centre, 2005
- PB** Bahá'u'lláh. *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1972.
- PM** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi. *Prayers and Meditations*, 1st pocket ed.

Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987

- PT** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*. Ontario: Nine Pines Publishing
- PUP** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982
- Q** Qur'án. Numerous editions
- SAQ** 'Abdu'l-Bahá, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney. *Some Answered Questions*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- SDC** 'Abdu'l-Bahá, trans. Marzieh Gail. *Secret of Divine Civilization*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990
- SLH** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. World Centre Publications. *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*. Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia,
- SV** Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Marzieh Gail. *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, 4th ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991
- SWAB** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- SWB** Báb, The. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- TAB** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Tablets of Abdul-Bahá Abbas*, volumes 1-3
- TAF** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Tablet to Auguste Forel*
- TB** Bahá'u'lláh, comp. Research Department of the UHJ, trans. Habib Taherzadeh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988
- TDH** Shoghi Effendi. *This Decisive Hour, Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá'ís 1932–1946*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992
- TN** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Traveller's Narrative, A*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- WT** 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994
- WOB** Shoghi Effendi. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 1st pocket ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991

\* No formal list of abbreviations exists, but semi-formal lists can be derived from abbreviations used by the Bahá'í World Centre. First, a partial list is in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-86*. Second, the BWC downloads site has a list of their filename abbreviations at [library.bahai.or/README/README-TREE.htm](http://library.bahai.or/README/README-TREE.htm). Those two have been combined. See more at [bahai-library.com/?file=abbreviations](http://bahai-library.com/?file=abbreviations)

## Appendix II

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#### ***Lights of ‘Irfán* Book One, © 2000**

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The Uses of Genealogy and Genealogical Information in Select  
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Designation of Mírzá Yahyá Azal in the Writings of the Báb: Will and Testament of the Báb; Memorandum from the Research Department; Making the Crooked Straight

Letters Written on Behalf of the Guardian

Daniel's Prophecies

## Appendix III

### Publications of the 'Irfán Colloquia

#### English-Language Publications

- *Scripture and Revelation*, Moojan Momen (ed.), Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1997
- *The Bahá'í Faith and the World's Religions*, Moojan Momen (ed.), Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 2005.
- *The Lights of 'Irfán: Compilation of Papers Presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia*, Iraj Ayman general ed, Books I-IX, 2000-08.
- *Occasional Papers* volume 1: "Images of Christ in the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," by Maryam Afshar.

#### Persian-Language Publications

- *Safini-yi 'Irfán*, Vol. I to Vol. X (Collections of the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia in Persian), 1998-2007.

All 'Irfán publications in English and Persian may be ordered from:

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#### German-Language Publications

- *Beiträge des 'Irfán-Kolloquiums 2003: 'Irfán-Studien zum Bahá'í-Schrifttum* (Collections of the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia in German). Hofheim, Germany: Bahá'í-Verlag. Vol. I to Vol. IV, 2004-2007.

'Irfán publications in German may be ordered from:

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