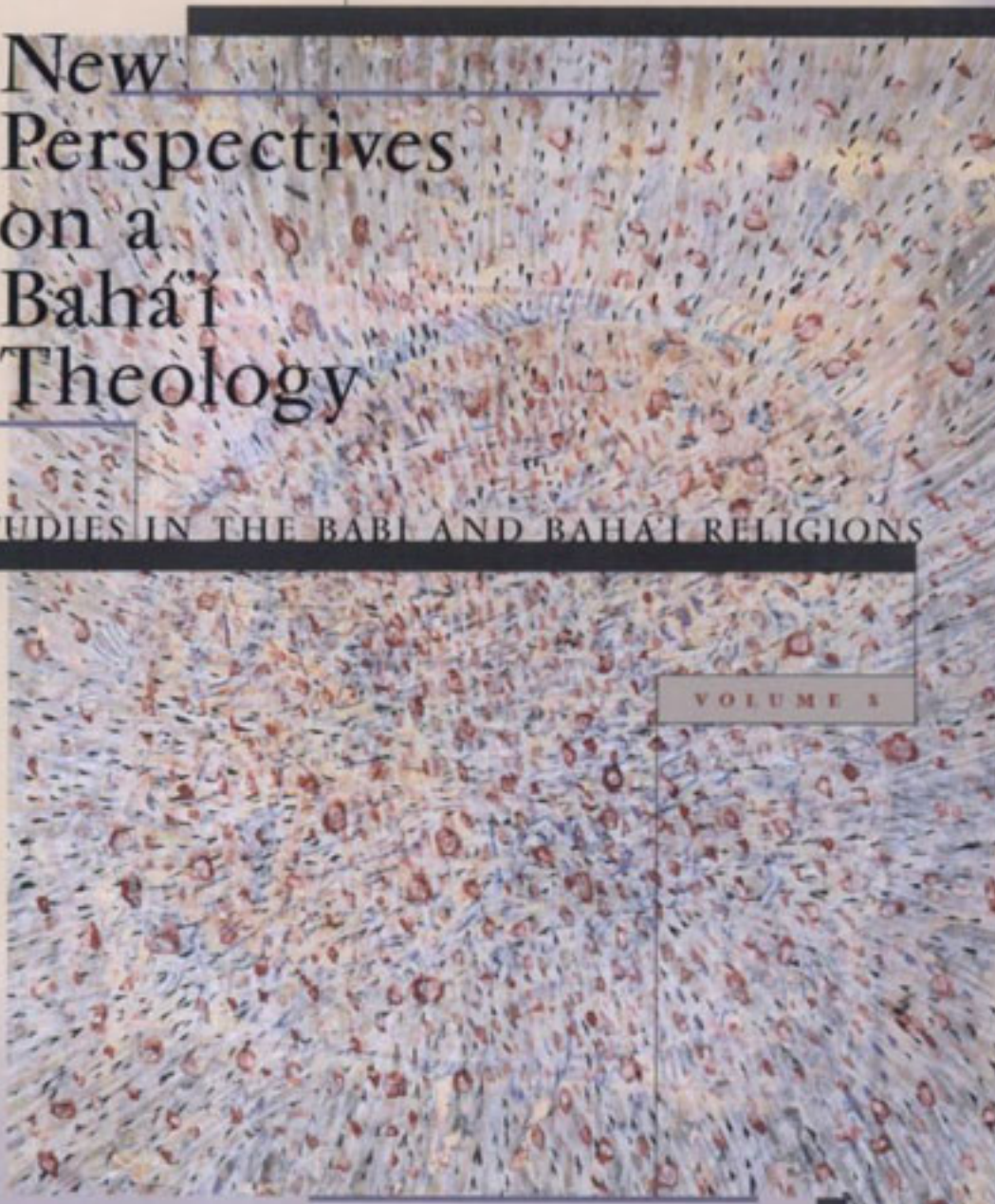
# REVISIONING THE SACRED

## New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology

STUDIES IN THE BABI AND BAHA'I RELIGIONS

VOLUME 8



Edited by Jack McLean

STUDIES IN THE
BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í RELIGIONS

VOLUME EIGHT

# REVISIONINGTHESACRED: NEWPERSPECTIVESONA BAHÁ'Í THEOLOGY

STUDIES IN THE BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í RELIGIONS
(formerly *Studies in Bábí and Bahci'i History)*

Anthony A. Lee, General Editor

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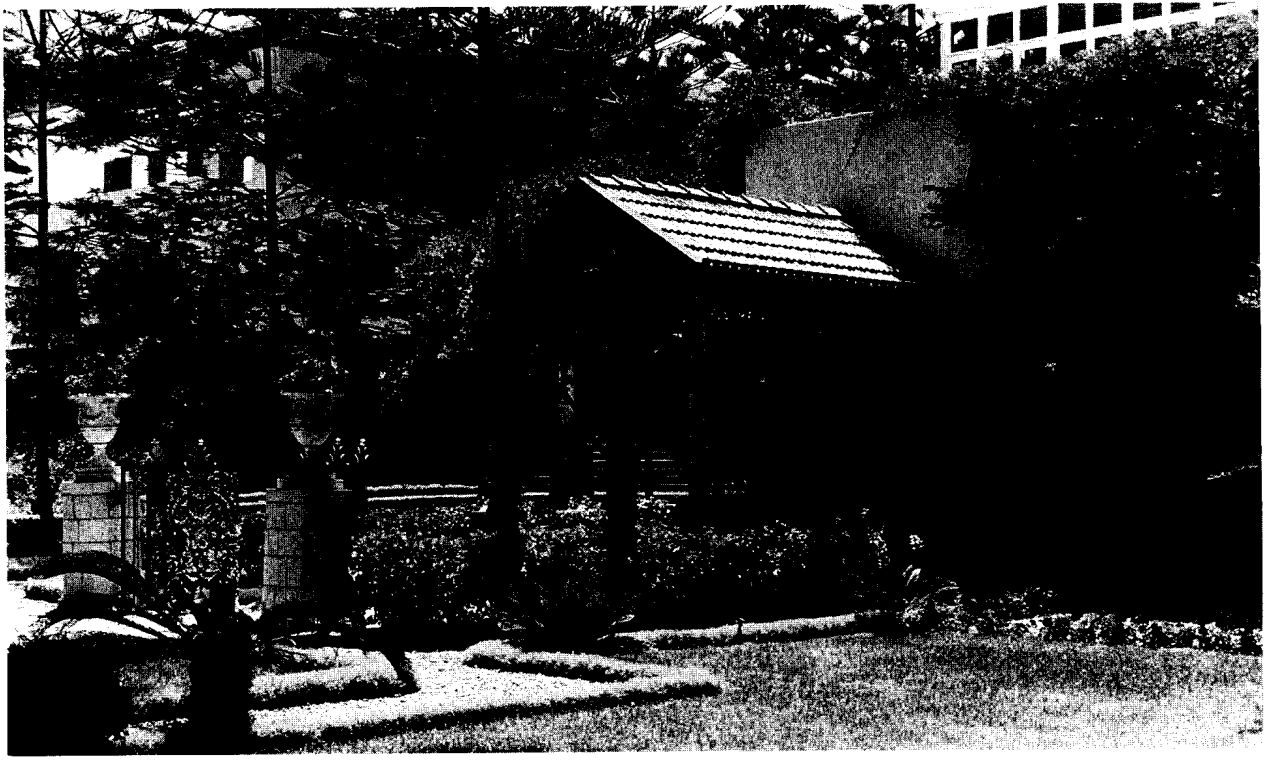

THE ENTRANCE TO THE SHRINE OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH
the resting place of the prophet and founder of the Bahá'í Faith and
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General Editor
ANTHONY A. LEE

# REVISIONINGTHESACRED: NEWPERSPECTIVESONA BAHÁ'Í THEOLOGY

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This volume is dedicated to

*Udo Schaefer*

for his outstanding contribution in helping to break the ground some forty years ago and for his present labors.

## CONTENTS

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In today's world, any theology, Bahá'í or other, is viewed as having virtually no significant impact on thought, culture, or conduct. Yet, in theological and comparative studies of religion, more commonly called today "global theology," unsuspected resources lie as yet untapped to help form a world consciousness based on the on-going elaboration of common ethical ties, spiritual life styles, and shared beliefs. Global theology, moreover, can certainly assist in building bridges between the ever-shrinking intellectual shores of East and West and thereby facilitate cross-cultural communication. Religious Studies also contain an as yet undeveloped peace component that can significantly contribute to a pacific mindset, not only among the world's great religions, but also within the larger secular community.

In this light, Anthony A. Lee and Payman Afsharian deserve the first vote of thanks for their willingness to venture to publish Baha'i works of a theological nature. Without their continued support, the achievements in Bahá'í Studies of the English-speaking community would not have received as wide a notice. I thank also all the scholars who recognized the value of producing such a book and who were concerned enough to contribute to its publication. It has been a pleasure collaborating and corresponding with all of you over these past two years throughout the several tasks that have led to this volume.

I mention here again Dr. Udo Schaefer to whom this volume is dedicated, as a serious promoter of Baha'i theology over the past four decades. Dr. Schaefer recognized some forty years ago the necessity of an independent Baha'i theology and has dedicated his ensuing years to the publication of a number of works to that end. Udo Schaefer, like other scholars who share the same outlook, has long since realized that the Bahá'í Faith cannot come to be recognized as a distinct and independent world religion without a distinctive theology. Moreover, every scholar who contributes to this emerging field is worthy of mention.

This is the first multi-authored volume dedicated to the understanding of Baha'i theology ***per se*** as a free-standing discipline within Baha'i studies. It is my hope that this work will help attract the

attention of Baha'i theologians in the making and the wider notice of scholars of religion. My aim is to perpetuate the sacred study of religion in a Baha'i context so that in the twenty-first century it might continue to thrive and take its rightful place alongside the great theological traditions of the sister religions of the world.

# INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology* has provided a group of scholars with an opportunity to collaborate on a publication that presents some current issues in emergent Bahá'í theology. The Baha'i scholars of religion appearing in this volume are among those living in the last two decades of the twentieth century, years that may well prove to be a historic turning point for the development of the sacred study.

I say historic for three reasons. The first is that although Baha'i theology is still in a formative stage, it is nonetheless beginning to demonstrate certain characteristic features and a recognizable voice of its own. The second is that these articles, although they could not hope in one volume to adequately depict the whole field, nonetheless represent some of the preoccupations of the current generation of Baha'i scholars of religion. These writings reflect selected concerns and styles of the present period. Third, the Study of Religion Seminars held under the auspices of The Association for Bahá'í Studies in English-speaking Europe and also in North America have been instrumental in helping to form a small but dedicated group of scholars who have by now acquired the skills, and in some cases the professional training, to do exegesis and to write thoughtfully on theology and the history and comparative study of religion. The following essays reflect some of these acquired skills.

It is worth noting that the modest but steadily growing accomplishments achieved thus far in the field have been made in large part without the advantages enjoyed by scholars in the more ancient traditions and institutions of the other great religions of the world. While the Baha'i 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 Baha'i revelation upon which to draw. Indeed, there are some who still reject the validity of the whole notion of Baha'i 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.

Since the Baha'i Faith is a religion without professional clergy, nothing resembling Bahá'í divinity schools has been established and only a restricted number of Baha'i scholars has thus far had formal academic training in the study of religion. An even smaller number is teaching religious studies at university and of these very few are in the envious position of being able to teach university-accredited courses on the Baha'i Faith. Lectureships and courses on the Baha'i Faith have been established only during the past decade within selected departments of religion, a significant accomplishment that augurs well for future developments. At this time, several Bahá'í scholars of religion work professionally in fields unconnected to the academic study of their faith. Consequently, these scholars have had to rely to a large extent on their own resources to promote critical studies of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.

Fortunately, the Study of Religion Seminars or Special Interest Groups of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies mentioned above have provided a much-needed and valuable focus for research and formal presentations, as well as providing avenues for publication of scholarly articles. Although scholars of religion have had to work in less than favorable conditions to further their aims, their competence and dedication have lead to the publication of instructive works. With the publication of *The Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* (1982) and more recently *Abhá: A Journal of Bábí–Bahá'í Studies* (U.K.) edited by Stephen Lambden and *The Bahá'í Studies Review* (1990) under the auspices of the Association for Baha'i Studies for English-speaking Europe with Seena Faze1 acting as current co-editor, periodicals devoted to studies of the Baha'i religion have been established, although both *World Order* and more recently *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* CABS-North America) have published occasional articles on specifically religious themes.

Another significant development worthy of mention is the establishment of the Baha'i Studies lectures at the American Academy of Religion begun by Anthony Lee and Susan Maneck in 1984 and whose current secretary is Robert Stockman. Although the name of the group, now called Bahá'í Studies Colloquy, has changed several times, the activities of this group provides an important venue for the exchange of ideas relating to Baha'i religious studies.

In a recent article, Seena Fazel, using the technique of citation analysis, has pointed to a significant increase in the output of articles

related to the specifically religious aspects of the Baha'i Faith in the years 1988-1993.1 Yet unfulfilled tasks still beckon the scholar of the Bahá'í religion. The systematic "Baha'i theologian" has yet to emerge-if indeed that were possible in the postmodern and post-systematic age into which we have slipped-and a number of fundamental Baha'i teachings have suffered from neglect. Some eighty-five years (to 1996) after 'Abdu'l-Baha's proclamation in pastor R. J. Campbell's nonconformist City Temple in London on September 10, 1911 of the oneness of religion as "the gift of God to this enlightened age,"[2] there is still no major scholarly work in Baha'i perspective on this most vital theme, which along with the oneness of humanity, is the most distinctive and characteristically Bahá'í teaching. Neither is there yet any major scholarly work on progressive revelation, one of the grand themes of Bahá'u'lláh's preeminent doctrinal work the Kitáb-i Iqán (The Book of Certitude), although Christopher Bucks recent work *Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i Iqán* (Kalimát Press, 1995) provides a focused scholarly discussion of the Islamic references in Bahá'u'lláh's work of "unsurpassed pre-eminence." Rather than enumerate the gaps that currently exist in Baha'i studies of religion, I refer the reader to Stephen Lambden's instructive article that argues for the pressing need of Baha'i theology to fill several vacuums.3

In a volume dedicated to the study of Baha'i theology, it would be helpful to allude briefly to certain parameters of the field. Theology, at least in its Christian versions, has for centuries been associated with an oppressive dogmatism. The reemergence of fundamentalism in recent times can be viewed as an on-going manifestation of the dogmatic mindset in another guise. Of course, it would not be true to assert that the dogmatic mentality generally prevails in religious studies today. We are hardly living in the age of the great dogma, but rather in a post-dogmatic age. Postmodernism and especially, today's current intellectual fashion, deconstructionism, are dedicated to the overthrow of authoritarian systems, be they theological or other. To say, however, that Baha'i theology is non-dogmatic-at least in the Christian sense of the word-does not derive from a respect for the postmodern temper of the times. It is rather because the Baha'i Faith simply declines to give institutional sanction to the opinions of individual scholars as being normative and binding, however authoritative or cogent their

arguments may be. Bahá'í scholarship is, moreover, dedicated to creativity and diversity, which mitigate against monolithic thinking, and while it defends and preserves the integrity of those teachings enshrined in Bahá'í scripture, it respects the right of the individual to a full expression of his or her views.

It would not be entirely true, however, to maintain that there is no sense of a qualified "dogmatic" authority in the Bahá'í Faith. While Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), proponent of Albrecht Ritschl's liberal Protestant theology, in his classic seven-volume *Dogmengeschichte* (The History of Dogma),[4] came to view dogmas as oppressive fabrications that obscured the purity of the Gospel message, he maintained nonetheless that the meaning of dogma in the primitive church was that of a revealed truth.5 This thought, I think, can be applied to the kerygmatic theology of Shoghi Effendi, which, as a theology of the Word proclaims, interprets, and hands down the truths of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings. It does not easily escape one's notice that the certitude of Shoghi Effendi's doctrinal interpretations speak with the very clear voice of the charismatic authority of his office as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. In this sense, and to use George Santayana's apt phrase, the word dogmatic is not entirely an outmoded "term of reproach."

I view the shape of emerging Bahá'í theology, which I define loosely here as critical reflection on the specifically religious content of the Word of God, as being outlined by three subdisciplines: exegesis, critical apologetics, and philosophical theology. I highlight here a few points from this last statement.

First, any Bahá'í theology must be firmly text-rooted. The Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, is the celestial city6 and it is first and foremost to that city that we must direct our steps in order to discover the worlds of inner meaning and outer significance. Bahá'u'lláh says:

> 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.7

Second-and this is the more liberal side of Shoghi Effendi's theology—Bahá'í theology must correlate its findings with other world religions and systems of thought. Correlation is a method that one may

view as a kind of theology in its own right, for it includes dialogue and rapprochement as well as making correspondences or, when necessary, disjunctures of the Baha'i Faith and classical or more modernistic philosophical, theological, or spiritual issues, and just as importantly, movements. Third, Bahá'í theology should remain within the borderlands of theology and philosophy. For it is clear from even the most cursory reading of Baha'i sacred scripture that Baha'i Holy Writ embeds at source a variety of philosophical concepts. Fourth, I return to the point made above that Baha'i theology should strive to avoid the oppressive noise of dogmatism and invite diversity without scattering to the four winds those teachings which are clearly and distinctly its own.

But it is above all the substance or content of the Baha'i sacred writings that defines what makes for a distinctive Baha'i theology. While gathering up and stating the essential of certain primordial teachings from antiquity and anticipating at the same time questions of modernity, the Bahá'í writings touch on a great variety of themes: the old question of "the one and the many" (unity and diversity), the prophetic teaching of the apophatic godhead, the ethical mission of the prophets, the nature of faith, progressive revelation, the relativity of religious truth, the spiritual oneness of the world's great religions, the indwelling names and attributes of God,[8] the role of religion as a progenitor of cultures and civilizations, spiritual anthropology in the form of an interaction of soul, mind, body, and spirit, and of course, spirituality which is the living expression of faith, and spirituality's friends, prayer and mysticism. These are just some of the Baha'i Faith's more outstanding teachings which will lend themselves handily to the further development of Baha'i theology.

While the articles that follow reflect the preoccupations of the present, they also have implications for the future. For the outstanding Baha'i thinkers who will no doubt emerge in the twenty-first century will either develop further some of the questions and dialectical styles represented here, or they will take Baha'i theology in other directions, determining another discourse and raising and answering other questions. But the basic task of the Bahá'í theologian will always remain the elucidation of "the teachings," and Shoghi Effendi has said that: "Teaching is of course the head cornerstone of all Bahá'í service. . . ."[9] The insights of every Bahá'í scholar, theologian or other, will result

from a close, prayerful, and faithful reflection upon the Bahá'í sacred writings. In the twenty-first century, the Baha'i Faith must continue to make good its birthright and fulfill its great potential as a significant unifier of the world's great religions, one of the exciting promises of its sacred scriptures. In this task, Bahá'í theology has no mean part to play.

## NOTES

1. Seena Fazel, "Bahá'í Scholarship 1988-1993: An Examination Using Citation Analysis," a paper presented at the Seminar on Baha'i Studies, Bedfordshire, U.K., 6-8 January 1995. Citation analysis is widely used as a quantitative tool to assess the influence, significance, and impact of research in a field. In his study, Faze1 determined which books, articles, and authors were most frequently cited in publications on the Bábí–Bahá'í religions appearing in both Baha'i and non-Baha'i academic periodicals in 1988–1993. These results were compared with the citation data from 1978-1983. The emerging theme in the later years is Baha'i theology, compared with the situation between 1978-1983 when history dominated the most cited list of publications.

2. *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London,* p. 19. The talk in City Temple on September 10, 1911 was 'Abdu'l-Baha's first in the West. The talk was given on the first Sunday after 'Abdu'l-Baha's arrival in England. "He spoke from the City Temple pulpit to the evening congregation at the special desire of the Pastor, the Reverend R. J. Campbell" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London,* p. 17).

Reginald John Campbell (1867-1956) became famous in the first decade of the twentieth century as an unorthodox preacher and proponent of the controversial, so-called "New Theology." In *The* New *Theology,* Campbell opposed what he viewed as antiquated dogmatic theology. Without being a pantheist, Campbell took a very immanentist view of God in the universe and in humanity and following the absolute idealists argued for a unity in multiplicity. Campbell reinterpreted the basic Christian doctrines of the fall, atonement, the person of Christ in less absolute, more metaphysical terms, and greatly reduced the historical uniqueness of Christ. He also embraced socialism as a means of inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth.

3. "Doing Baha'i Scholarship in the 1990's: A Religious Studies Perspective," *The Bahá'í Studies Review,* Vol. 3, No. 2, (1994), pp. 59-80.

4. Translated by Neil Buchanan from the third German edition (London: Williams and Norgate, 1897).

5. ". . . for according to the conception of the church, dogma can be noth-

ing else than the revealed faith itself." *(History of Dogma,* Vol. 1, p. 9) Harnack makes the same point on p. 15.

6. *Kitáb-i Íqán,* p. 199.

7. *Kitáb-i Íqán,* p. 160.

8. This question was systematically elaborated by Hegel's contemporary, the philosopher Karl C. F. Krause (1781-1832) as *panentheism.*

9. The full quotation is: "Teaching is of course the head cornerstone of all Baha'i service, but successful teaching is dependent upon many factors, one of which is the development of a true Baha'i way of living and the fulfilment of responsibilities which we have incurred." (From a letter dated 3 June 1952, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, in *The Compilation of Compilations,* Vol. II, p. 317)

# THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY: A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVISM

*Dann J. May*

Every religion, according to 'Abdu'l-Baha, has a particular focus, a central theme or vision that both grounds and informs all of its doctrines, teachings, and laws. For the Baha'i Faith, this central theme "is the consciousness of the oneness of mankind."[1] The theological foundation and key prerequisite for the realization of the oneness of humanity is the Baha'i principle of the essential unity of the world's religions. According to 'Abdu'l-Baha, the Baha'i principle of religious unity is "the cornerstone" of the oneness of all people and the very foundation for its realization in the world of human affairs.2 Bahá'u'lláh asserts, moreover, that the fundamental purpose of religious faith "is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men."[3] The principal reason that the necessity of religious unity must lie at the heart of the oneness of humankind rests in the conviction that religious faith is the sole basis from which people will find the necessary motivation, devotion, and vision to accomplish truly global fellowship among the peoples of the world. Wilfred Cantwell Smith is typical of many religious thinkers around the world who have recognized the role of faith in such an undertaking:

> The task of constructing even that minimum degree of world fellowship that will be necessary for man to survive at all is far too great to be

> accomplished on any other than a religious basis. From no other source than his faith, I believe, can man muster the energy, devotion, vision, resolution, capacity to survive disappointment, that will be necessary-that are necessary-for this challenge.4

Since the Bahá'í Faith would recognize its own aims and objectives in this line of reasoning, it should come as no surprise when Shoghi Effendi asserts that:

> 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 development of human society.5

Thus, while the oneness of humankind is the "pivotal principle" and central vision of the Baha'i Faith, its realization rests on the doctrine of religious unity.

The Baha'i principle of religious unity may be unique in the history of revealed religion. Unlike other post-revelational theologies, it is one of several foundational doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith whose source is to be found within its own sacred writings rather than in interpretation and commentary.6 Indeed, there is no lack of clear scriptural references to this important principle in the Baha'i canon. In fact, an entire volume of Bahá'u'lláh's sacred writings, the *Kitáb-i Íqán* (The Book of Certitude), has the concept of religious unity as one of its central themes.

One becomes aware, however, of a noticeable gap when one begins to review the theological literature written by Baha'i scholars on the topic of religious unity. It seems that the principle of religious unity is so central to the Baha'i Faith, so obvious and compelling that little serious writing has been done on the subject and the potential problematic nature of the unity paradigm has been scarcely addressed by Baha'i scholars. Hatcher and Martin's *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (1984), intended to serve as a textbook on the Baha'i Faith, devotes only three pages to the principle of religious unity.7 The welcome recent exception is Udo Schaefer's instructive

essay "Bahá'u'lláh's *Einheitsparadigma und die Konkurrenz religioser Wahrheitsanspruche*" title translated as *Beyond the Clash of Religions. The Emergence of a New Paradigm* (1995), which sets out the Baha'i interpretation of religious unity as the new paradigm of the age, while at the same time accounting for religious diversity.[8]

The Bahá'í doctrine of religious unity raises a number of questions. In those writings where the principle of religious unity is mentioned it is often unclear what the Baha'i writings intend by such phrases as "the religions of God," "all religions," "the divine religions," or "all the Prophets." Do such phrases mean what Muslims intend by the term *ahl al-kitáb*, literally "the people of the Book" (i.e., Jews, Christians, Muslims, and perhaps Zoroastrians)? Most often, the only examples cited in the Bahá'í corpus are from these traditions. In fact, in the sacred writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, these are the only religious traditions mentioned, although 'Abdu'l-Baha's authoritative interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's writings state that the Buddha originally established the oneness of God and a new religion.9 Or do such phrases also include the religious traditions of Asia (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Chinese religions, and so on) since these faiths are occasionally mentioned in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice? Or does the Baha'i view also include the vast and varied so-called tribal or indigenous traditions of the world? In any case, such generic terms raise questions about the very real and profound differences that exist between the various religious traditions, let alone those differences that exist within each one.

Another possible hermeneutic approach may be that what is intended by such phrases is not to be taken literally but symbolically. This raises the further question of whether the Bahá'í view is a descriptive statement about the world's religions or a symbolic one lacking any cognitive content. Is the Bahá'í view an assertion about the true nature of religion, or a symbolic or mythological statement, designed to provide a coherent worldview in order to foster better relations between Bahá'ís and the people of other faiths? Despite the existence of many capable Bahá'í scholars around the world, answers to these questions have not been worked out in any detail.

## EXEGESIS OF IMPORTANT TERMS AND PHRASES

A fuller understanding of the Bahá'í principle of religious unity rests significantly on the understanding and interpretation of key

Baha'i phrases. Since Baha'i scriptural terminology is in large part derived from Islamic theology, the exegesis that follows will depend heavily on Islamic sources.

Initially we may ask how the phrases "all religions" and "all the Prophets," both of which are employed in the Baha'i scriptures to refer collectively to the world's religions and their founders, are to be interpreted. These phrases, together with other similar ones such as "the divine religions" or "the religions of God," are the usual English translations of the corresponding Arabic or Persian terms. The phrase "all religions" is the English translation of the Arabic *al-adyan kulliha* and the Persian *jami'-yi adyan*.[10] *Adyun* is the plural of *din*, the Arabic and Persian word for "religion," while *kulliha* and *jumi* are the Arabic and Persian words for "all."[11] Islamic sources define *din* as "'religion' in the broadest sense," thus, it "may mean any religion" or even religious knowledge as opposed to intellectual knowledge; but it is primarily used in the Qur'an to refer to "the religion of Islam" *(din al-Islam)*.[12] When other religions are mentioned in the Qur'an, the Arabic word *milla* (lit., "religion" or "sect") is used. However, this meaning is now largely obsolete in the Arabic speaking world.[13] Nevertheless, the phrase "all religions" and its variants are still unclear, for it is not immediately obvious what religious traditions are intended by such phrases.

As a partial clarification of the question, it may be said that the authoritative writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi do include the names of other religions. For example, in the letters written in English on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, there are references made to the "nine existing religions," those being the Baha'i Faith, the religion of the Báb (Babism), Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religion of the Sabians. While Shoghi Effendi recognizes the problematic and controversial nature of such a list, he does not consider these nine religions as "the only true religions that have appeared in the world."[14] In fact, other religious groups (e.g., Confucians, Sikhs, and Native Americans) are positively mentioned in Baha'i canonical literature.[15] Furthermore, within the Baha'i scriptures, the number nine is symbolic for completeness or wholeness because it is seen as the completion or culmination of the single digit numbers.[16] Consequently, the use of the phrase "nine existing religions" can be interpreted metaphorically to refer to all religions.

The obscure reference to the Sabians as one of the "nine existing religions" is cryptic. However, an analysis of this term will shed some

light on what the Bahá'í writings intend by such phrases as "all the religions." The Sabians (Arabic: *Sabi*, pl. *Sabi'un*) are first mentioned in the Qur'an (2:59, 5:73, and 22:17), but their identity has long been problematic.17 The Qur'an identifies the Sabians, along with the Jews and the Christians (and by implication, the Zoroastrians) as *ahl al-Kitáb*, those who have received revealed scriptures. Islamic sources identify at least two distinct groups associated with the term ***Sabians:***

> (1) ***the Mandaeans or Subbas,*** a Judeo-Christian sect practising the rites of baptism in Mesopotamia (i.e., Christian followers of John the Baptist); ***(2) The Sabaeans of Harran,*** a pagan sect which survived for a considerable period under Islam.[18]

A clear identification of the Sabians is further hampered by the fact that many groups, upon encountering Islam, often claimed adherence to the Sabian religion mentioned in the Qur'an in order not to be put to the sword and to benefit from the quranic privileges and the protection associated with the *ahl al-Kitáb*. Furthermore, sympathetic Muslims frequently employed the term upon encountering peoples of diverse religious faiths including Mazdaens in Mesopotamia and Iran, Samaritans in Palestine, Buddhists and Hindus in India, and followers of tribal religions in East Africa.[19] Despite the confusing use of the term, Christopher Buck, employing an historical methodology based on the use of both Muslim and Christian sources, persuasively argues that the original quranic Sabians were southern Mesopotamian peoples (i.e., Mandaeans and Elchasaites) practising various purification rituals.[20] In summing up the problems associated with the term, Buck concludes:

> Exactly because it was imprecise, the word *sabi'un* functioned as a term of great legal importance by contributing to an attitude of toleration towards minority religions under Muslim rule. The term evolved from a once-specific designation to a classification which, adapted to ever new historical contexts, expanded its meaning to embrace peoples of otherwise uncertain standing, giving them a place of security within a Quranically sanctioned framework.[21]

Accordingly, the designation "Sabians," as it is used in the Islamic world, appears to be inclusive in nature, and may thus be used by Bahá'ís as a reference to any religion not specifically mentioned in the Qur'an. Moreover, since the term ***Sabians*** was applied to so-called

"pagan" groups (i.e., religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam; or religions that predate them) its use may best be interpreted as symbolically referring to all ancient, tribal, or indigenous religions. This interpretation would make viable an alternative interpretation of the Baha'i listing of the "nine existing religions," since tribal or indigenous religions, which claim some 112 million people world wide, are rarely mentioned otherwise.[22]

In the Baha'i scriptures, the phrases "all the Prophets" or "all the Prophets of God" are often used to refer collectively to various prophets or, to use the Bahá'í term, "Manifestations" (Arabic: *mazhar*, "manifestation" of the essence of God), those extraordinary individuals who initiated and founded the various religious traditions.23 Such phrases are the English translations of the Persian *jami' anbiyá*. *Anbiyá* is the plural of the Arabic and Persian word *nabí*, meaning a prophet, that is, one "whose mission lies within the framework of an existing religion" (e.g., Ezekiel or Isaiah), as opposed to a *rasúl* ("Messenger" or "Envoy," pl. *rusúl*), one "who brings a new religion or major new revelation," such as Christ or Muhammad.24 This distinction between a *rasúl* and a *nabí* has been recently challenged by Seena Faze1 and Khazeh Fananapazir in their essay "A Baha'i Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam,"[25] which contains a good analysis of these and other related terms. It should be noted, however, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses a similar terminology to distinguish between what he terms the "independent" and "dependent" prophets. The independent prophets are those who bring new laws and claim a new revelation (e.g., Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh) while the dependent prophets are those who work within an existing religious tradition (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Confucius).[26]

According to the British scholar of religion, Geoffrey Parrinder, the Qur'an mentions twenty-eight prophets and messengers by name-including many of those mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament.[27] The Qur'an, however, does not seem to limit their number to twenty-eight. In fact, it indicates that there have been countless prophets sent throughout the history of the human race. For many of these prophets, the details of their lives are lost in the mists of ancient history and prehistory. Concerning these prophets, the Qur'an states:

> We did aforetime send Messengers [*rusúl*] before thee: of them there are some whose story we have related to thee, and some whose story we have

> not related to thee. (Qur'an 40:78)
>
> And there never was a people without a warner [*nadhir*] having lived among them. (Qur'an 35:24)[28]

No doubt, on this basis, later Islamic theologians and scholars increased the number of prophets well beyond twenty-eight. Indeed, even in the *hadíth*, the collected sayings of Muhammad, the number of prophets is symbolically said to be 124,000, a number so large as to both dazzle the imagination and prevent humanity from claiming that it was not adequately warned of universal judgment.29

Like the Qur'an, the Bahá'í scriptures contain the names of numerous prophets and messengers. To be precise, at least thirty-two prophets are mentioned by name in the Baha'i writings, twenty-three of which are identical to those mentioned in the Qur'an. A significant difference about the prophets named in the Baha'i writings is that, whereas the Qur'an names only prophets associated with Abrahamic heritage, the Baha'i scriptures include "prophets" or founders of religion from Asian cultures, Zoroaster (Zarathustra), the Buddha, Confucius, and Krishna.

Also, like the Qur'an, the Baha'i writings do not limit the number of these individuals to thirty-two. Thus, the Báb declares: "God hath raised up Prophets and revealed Books as numerous as the creatures of the world, and will continue to do so to everlasting."[30] This would, theoretically at least, make the number of prophets practically infinite, or at the very least, even larger than the highest numbers mentioned in Islam. In fact, Shoghi Effendi, while quoting from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, asserts that:

> From the *"beginning that hath* no *beginning,"* these Exponents of the Unity of God and Channels of His incessant utterance have shed the light of the invisible Beauty upon mankind, and will continue, to the *"end that hath no end,"* to vouchsafe fresh revelations of His might and additional experiences of His inconceivable glory. To contend that any particular religion is final, that *"all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the Tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest"* would indeed be nothing less than sheer blasphemy.31

Clearly then, the Bahá'í writings recognize the existence of vast numbers of Manifestations who have appeared in all cultures throughout the history of the human race. Thus, given such references, the phrase "all the Prophets" is best interpreted as broadly and as open-endedly as possible. Such an interpretation would include all known historical prophets, messengers, and founders of the world's religions, whether of the past, present, or future, together with all those whose identity has now been lost. Similarly, the phrase "all religions" should also be interpreted in the widest possible context to include all known existing religions together with those that are no longer practiced.

## TRANSCENDENT UNITY

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the nature of reality is ultimately a unity, in contrast to a view that would postulate a multiplicity of differing or incommensurate realities. In other words, the nature of truth is unitary and not pluralistic. In a talk delivered in New York City in December 1912, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that "oneness is truth and truth is oneness which does not admit of plurality."[32] In a similar vein, during a talk in Paris in October 1911, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that "Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one."[33]

The Baha'i principle of the unity of religions is grounded on this basic conception of the oneness of reality (*al haqq*). This principle, so frequently discussed in the Baha'i sacred writings, asserts that a common transcendent truth not only lies above the varying and divergent religious traditions but also is their ultimate source and inspiration. For example, the Báb claims in The Book of Names (Arabic: *Kitáb-i Asmá*) that "every religion proceedeth from God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting," while Baha'u'llah, in referring to the religions of the world, writes that "these principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light."[34] In the most direct and concise passage on the subject, Baha'u'llah maintains that the revelation that each Manifestation or Messenger of God receives "is exalted above the veils of plurality and the exigencies of number."[35] Finally, in the Kitab-i Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh even refers to God as "the Lord of all Religions."[36]

It should be clear from the passages quoted above that the Baha'i principle of religious unity affirms the existence of a common

transcendent source from which the world's religious traditions originate and receive their inspiration. As such, the Baha'i view is remarkably similar to the thought of Frithjof Schuon, a Swiss metaphysician and Sufi mystic who persuasively argues for what he terms the "transcendent unity of religions," which he claims lies at the very heart of every religious tradition.[37] Like the Baha'i Faith, Schuon holds that the religions of the world originate from the same ultimate source. "The Divine Will," writes Schuon, "has distributed the one Truth under different forms or, to express it in another way, between different humanities."[38] Writing on the same subject and in similar language, Bahá'u'lláh insists that:

> There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed.39

It should be obvious from this reference that Bahá'u'lláh, like Schuon, is not affirming that all religions are the same, for he alludes to the differences among them. Indeed, he claims that the religions of the world only seem to be dissimilar due to "the varying requirements of the ages in which they where promulgated."[40] In other words, the apparent differences that exist among the various religious traditions are due to particular cultural and historical factors.

While this scriptural explanation is a recurrent theme throughout the Baha'i writings, it is certainly not unique to the Baha'i Faith, although it significantly predates modern scholastic interpretations. Such cultural and historical factors have been recognized and discussed by several scholars of religion. For instance, the philosopher of religion, Patrick Burke, argues that:

> The principle by which religions resemble and differ from one another is not religious, but cultural. Similarities and differences between religions are similarities and differences between cultures. . . It is these cultural elements that confer on any particular religion its distinctive identity. . . . What appear to be conflicts between religious faiths must be seen then, first and foremost as conflicts between cultural values.41

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í writings are quite explicit that such differences are not intrinsic nor innate to the ultimate source of these

religions. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh's argument about the Prophets of God is as follows:

> It is clear and evident, therefore, that any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world. Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared.[42]

## THE TWOFOLD NATURE OF EVERY RELIGION

While the Bahá'í principle of religious unity does not claim that all the religions are the same, it does claim that they all share certain fundamental and essential features that are distinguished from other nonessential aspects related to the historical, cultural, and linguistic context in which each religious tradition develops. Consequently, the Bahá'í writings, while recognizing the existence of religious diversity, seek to explain it as secondary to an essential transcendental unity common to all religious traditions. For example, in a talk delivered at the Church of the Ascension, in New York City, on June 2, 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents an often-repeated explanation of the Bahá'í view of religious unity, a view that is known as "the twofold nature of religion":

> The religions of God have the same foundation, but the dogmas appearing later have differed. Each of the divine religions has two aspects. *The first is essential. It concerns morality and development* ***of*** *the virtues* ***of*** *the human world.* This aspect is common to all. It is fundamental; it is one; there is no difference, no variation in it. As regards the inculcation of morality and the development of human virtues, there is no difference whatsoever between the teachings of Zoroaster, Jesus and Bahá'u'lláh. In this they agree; they are one. *The second aspect* ***of*** *the divine religions is nonessential.* It concerns human needs and undergoes change in every cycle according to the exigency of the time.43

'Abdu'l-Baha, both in his writings and in his public presentations, constantly elaborates these two aspects of religion. For instance, in a talk delivered at the *Foyer de l'âme* in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Baha argues that:

> All these divisions we see on all sides, all these disputes and opposition, are caused because men cling to ritual and outward observances, and forget the simple, underlying truth. It is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity-while the reality is always the same, and one. The Reality is the Truth, and truth has no division.44

The Bahá'í concept of the twofold nature of religion distinguishes between two basic aspects held to be characteristic of every religious tradition: the first is characterized as "essential" or "fundamental" and refers to spiritual matters, while the second is characterized as "nonessential" or "accidental" and refers to matters related to the material or physical world. The essential aspect consists of "fundamental" and "universal truths" which are considered to be changeless and eternal and which constitute "the one foundation of all the religions of God."[45] These universal truths lie at the core of every religious tradition and, according to the Bahá'í writings, consist of faith in God (or, in nontheistic terms, ultimate reality), existential truths of life, the awakening of human potential, and the acquisition of spiritual attributes or virtues.46 Similarly, the philosopher of religion John Hick underscores the importance of the acquisition of virtues when he states that "love, compassion, generous concern for and commitment to the welfare of others is a central ideal" in each of the world's religious traditions.[47]

In contrast, the nonessential aspect of religion involves the outward form of religious practice and operates within the sphere of linguistic, cultural, and historical circumstances. 'Abdu'l-Bahá argues that the "divine religions of the Holy Manifestations of God are in reality one though in name and nomenclature they differ."[48] In addition, the nonessential aspect further consists of the social laws and regulations governing human affairs as well as ritual practices and doctrinal beliefs, which vary in every age and culture and even within any one religious tradition, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has so persuasively argued.49 For example, most if not all religious traditions stress the importance of the institution of marriage and the role of the family life, but they all differ on the particulars of the marriage ceremony, the rights and obligations of the husband, wife, and children, and the circumstances under which divorce is granted.

The distinction between the essential and nonessential aspects of religion is not unique to Baha'i theology. It resembles closely the "form

versus content" or "accident versus essence" debate over the content of myth. In his comprehensive four-volume work on mythology, *The Musks* of *God,* Joseph Campbell makes the distinction between what he calls the *local* manifestation of myth and ritual within a particular culture (what the Baha'i writings call the nonessential or accidental aspects) and the *universal* aspects (what the Baha'i writings call the essential or fundamental aspects) which go beyond what is historically and culturally determined.[50] As with the Baha'i view, it is the local manifestations of the universal aspects that differ and seem at variance with one another. This distinction between the essential and nonessential aspects of religion is also advanced by the historian Arnold Toynbee. Within every religious tradition, writes Toynbee, "there are essential counsels and truths, and there are nonessential practices and propositions."51

## FAITH: A COMMON DENOMINATOR

Besides the recognition of a transcendental unity of religions, the Baha'i writings also emphasize the process of personal transformation brought about through faith as another unifying factor in all religious traditions. For this reason, the Baha'i scriptures make a distinction between *institutionalized religion,* which involves ritual performance, traditional practice, and accumulated doctrine, and faith-that deeply personal attitude, feeling, and inward response of an individual to the transcendent, a response that usually has a powerful transforming effect on an individual and expresses itself in outward practice and belief.52

In the Baha'i sacred writings, the Arabic word *imán* is usually translated into English as the word *faith.* According to the Islamic scholar Cyril Glasse, *imán* refers to "those articles of belief which are part of Islam" such as "faith in God, His Angels, His books (revelations), His Prophets, and the Day of Judgement."[53] *Imán* is also understood as one of three aspects that make up Islam as religion *(din),* those other two being *islam* (the rites, practices, and laws) and *ihsun* (virtue). However, as with the corresponding English terms *religion* and *faith;* the words *imán, islam,* and *din* are often used ambiguously and interchangeably. Despite such ambiguity, philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion often distinguish between the concepts of faith on the one hand and religion or practice on the other.

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, often draws a distinction between faith and religion in his letters to individual

Baha'is. In such letters, he frequently contrasts those Bahá'ís "whose religion is Baha'i," those who merely "accept and observe the teachings" or call themselves Baha'is, from those "who live for the Faith," whose lives are transformed, "ennobled and enlightened."[54] He further clarifies this difference by contrasting "spiritual awareness" (personal faith) with "administrative procedure" and "adherence to rules" (institutionalized religion):

> The need is very great, everywhere in the world, in and outside the [Bahá'í] Faith, for a true spiritual awareness to pervade and motivate people's lives. No amount of administrative procedure or adherence to rules can take the place of this soul-characteristic, this spirituality which is the essence of man.55

Indeed, Shoghi Effendi characterizes such spiritual awareness as "that mystical feeling which unites man with God," which, he declares, is at "the core of religious faith."

> *For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling that unites man with* God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer to merely accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality, which he can acquire chiefly by the means of prayer. *The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character.* Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which first has to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into mere organization, and become a dead thing.56

> He [Bahá'u'lláh] further claims that the fundamental purpose of religions is to bring man nearer to God, and to change his character, which is of the utmost importance. Too much emphasis is often laid on the social and economic aspects of the Teachings; but the moral aspect cannot be overemphasized.57

It is the moral life and the personal response of the individual to divinity that is considered by Baha'is to lie at the basis of the religious life, a life that must be transformed through the acquisition of virtues and the spiritual nourishment of prayer and meditation, and not the

mere adherence to various doctrines and teachings, nor the pious participation in ceremonies and rituals, holidays and commemorations. Thus, Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, distills the essence of the Bahá'í view in the following statement:

> Every other Word of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Baha's Writings is a preachment on moral and ethical conduct; all else is the form, the chalice, into which the pure spirit must be poured; without the spirit and the action which must demonstrate it, it is a lifeless form.58

This distinction between the spirit and the form of religious faith is also echoed in the words of the great Hindu teacher Sri Ramakrishna when he pleads:

> Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each, which is spirituality. . . . Earn that first, acquire that, criticise no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them.59

Thus, it should be clear that when the Baha'i writings declare that the religious traditions share certain fundamental and essential aspects, it is primarily the transforming power of faith and its effects upon the individual and upon society as a whole that is meant. In other words, it is the religious life itself, the process of transformation that brings the individual nearer to God or ultimate reality, that is considered to be an essential feature of every religion. And while the particular path or outward expression may vary, it is the result or goal, and the process which leads to it, that are held to be the same. To take a commonplace analogy: there are many paths and approaches that may be used to scale a difficult and challenging mountain (differences in technique, equipment used, and so on) but they all share a common goal: reaching the summit.60 Or, seen from a more philosophical perspective, Hick has effectively argued that

> the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is manifestly taking place-and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological

> "spaces" within which, or "ways" along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ enlightenment/fulfillment.[61]

Accordingly, for Hick, while the various religious traditions differ in terms of their outward expression or linguistic form, in their attempts to describe and approach "the Real" (*al haqq,* his general term for divinity or the absolute), yet they all are involved in a similar process. No doubt this is what Ramakrishna is referring to when he suggests:

> As one and the same water, is called by different names in different languages, one calling it "water," another "Vatri," a third "aqua," and a fourth "Pani," so the one Sachchiclanancla, Absolute Being-Intelligence-Bliss, is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Hari, and by others as Brahman. . As one can ascend to the roof of a house by means of a ladder or a bamboo, or a staircase or in various other ways, so diverse are the ways and means to approach God. Every religion in the world is one of the ways to reach Him.62

In all of the cases that have been considered thus far, it is terminology and outward practice that are different, while the process, the conscious and active life of faith and its effects on the individual, is declared to be common to the various religious traditions. Similarly, in his influential book *The Meaning and End of Religion,* W. C. Smith argues that "faith differs in form, but not in kind. This applies both within communities and from one community to another."63 In this work, Smith further argues that while almost all cultures have a word for ***faith*** or its equivalents (i.e., piety, religiosity, or reverence), very few have a term corresponding to the Western notion of religion as an empiric a! phenomenon-an overt system of principles and practices separate from other aspects of life. 64 In fact, Smith argues that when a culture coins a word for "religion" as an overt abstract system, it is well on its way to losing sight of the importance of faith.

I have pointed out that the Baha'i writings contrast faith with religion, that system of practices and traditions, rites and beliefs, which, if followed only in an outward sense, often degenerates into a mere organization. It is religion as mere organization, devoid of the transforming power of faith, which the Baha'i writings point to as the source of so much of the diversity, conflict, and dissension that have so often characterized the religious traditions of the world. Furthermore,

the Bahá'í concept of religious unity is not some isolated or obscure notion, since it has its parallel expressions in such diverse thinkers as Ramakrishna, Hick, Schuon, and W. C. Smith. It is equally clear that the Bahá'í concept is not so much about the existence of similar doctrines or beliefs, but rather about the transformation that religion is capable of effecting in the moral and religious life of an individual-a life transformed and animated by and through the power of faith.

## THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

On strictly empirical grounds, asserts David Tracy, "diversity or plurality is a fact" of the world in which we live. Moreover, Tracy continues, "in every discipline it is the sheer plurality of the subject matter that needs some explanation."[65] This is no less true of philosophy, theology, or religious studies. Indeed, our modern awareness of the tremendous variety manifested by the world's religious traditions has spawned a wide-ranging interest in the general field of religious pluralism.

The term "religious pluralism" so prevalent today in the writings of scholars of religion requires a brief explanation. "Pluralism" has at least two distinct meanings. A first meaning expresses the growing tendency toward openness, tolerance, and interreligious dialogue found among many modern religious communities, while a second meaning takes note of the tremendous diversity found both within and among the world's religious traditions.66 It is especially within the context of this second meaning that one may speak of a theology or even a philosophy of religious pluralism.

Over the centuries, several distinct theories have been propounded to explain the great variety observed in the world's religious traditions, what Wilfred Cantwell Smith aptly describes as "the arresting diversity of mankind's faith."[67] Such religious diversity is what many historians of religion call the problem of religious pluralism. According to Hick, "the term ***religious pluralism*** refers simply to the fact that the history of religions shows a plurality of traditions and a plurality ofvariations within each."[68]

## TYPOLOGY OF RESPONSES TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In his essay, "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge," global theologian Raimundo Panikkar presents a typology of six possible options for coming to terms with religious pluralism. Panikkar

divides these options into two broad categories: the first five he groups under "monistic options" and the sixth he assigns to what he calls the "non-dualistic option."

(A) ***Monistic Options:*** All approaches to the problem of religious pluralism in which truth is said to be one, either one for all or one for every single individual.

*(1) False Claims:* All religions are false because of the falsity of their claim. There is no such ultimate destiny or Reality.

(2) *Subjectivism:* Each religion is true because it is the best for its adherents. Truth is subjective.

*(3) Exclusivism*: Only one religion is true. All the others are, at best, approximations.

(4) *Inclusivism/Primordial Tradition/Perennial Philosophy:* Religions share a common essence or refer ultimately to the same truth although in approximations. They all point to Reality and may all be included in a single world view.

*(5) Historical Process / Historical Relativism:* Religions are the products of history and thus are both similar and different according to the historical factors that have shaped them.

(B) ***Non-Dualistic Option***

(1) *Radical pluralism/Post-Modernism*: Each religion has unique features and presents mutually incommensurable insights. Each statement of a basic experience is to be evaluated on its proper terrain and merits because the very nature of truth is pluralistic.[69]

The last four of Panikkar's options are those most often debated in discussions of religious pluralism. Whereas Panikkar finds fault with the first five options, he makes a strong case for option six, that of radical pluralism. While the Bahá'í tradition accepts the existence of religious diversity, it acknowledges a common source for the world's religions and it recognizes certain underlying patterns and trends that historical and cultural factors both partially obscure and reveal. Thus, on the surface, the Bahá'í principle of religious unity seems to be inclusivistic, although a more careful examination of this principle reveals that it incorporates elements of perspectivism and historial process. I will examine below the Bahá'í concept of religious unity in

light of Panikkar's typology and some contemporary Western theories of religious pluralism that resemble the Baha'i concept.

## THE BAHÁ'Í REPUDIATION OF RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVITY

In using the Baha'i principle of religious unity as a criterium, three of Panikkar's options can be immediately ruled out. Obviously, the Bahá'í conception of religious unity does not deny the existence of a divine or ultimate reality. On the contrary, the Baha'i view holds that the world's religious traditions originate from the same ultimate reality and, consequently, they all contain certain universal truths. It should also be obvious that the Baha'i view cannot be considered subjectivistic, since it holds that religious truths, especially those that concern the nature of ultimate reality, are not simply what I or anyone else make them out to be. Indeed, Baha'i theology is grounded in the conception that ultimate reality is completely beyond the comprehension of human beings. In a wider discussion of Baha'i theology, Baha'i scholar J. A. McLean, as does Stephen N. Lambden in the essay found in this volume, borrows from the Sufi apophatic tradition to designate this conception of ultimate reality as "Bahá'u'lláh's negative theology" of the unmanifested God (*God-Hahut*).[70] Given such considerations, the Baha'i writings address the need for an intermediary or Manifestation of God who mediates between the unmanifested God and humankind and whose primary functions include the revelation of religious truth and the manifestation of divine attributes.

Finally, and most significantly, the Bahá'í approach to other religions is clearly not exclusivistic. Nowhere in the Baha'i corpus of sacred writings do we find the claim that one and only one religion is true or correct, to the exclusion of all the rest. Indeed, a central Baha'i principle related to the oneness of religion is that "religious truth is not absolute but relative," that it is not static but dynamic and that the process of "Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."[71] In fact, according to Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'u'lláh not only rejected the claim of any religion to be a final revelation, but he also disclaimed the finality of his own revelation:

> Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience. . . . [72]

The Bahá'í repudiation of religious exclusivism is more fully elaborated by Shoghi Effendi in his essay "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh." Near the end of this powerfully written essay, he unequivocally asserts:

> . . 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. "*To believe that all revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest*" must constitute in the eyes of every follower of the Faith a grave, an inexcusable departure from one of its most cherished and fundamental principles.73

## BAHÁ'Í INCLUSIVISM: GUARDING AGAINST OVERSIMPLIFICATION

Several writers of histories of religion have characterized the Bahá'í view as inclusivist. For instance, in her textbook *Living Religions,* Mary Pat Fisher mentions the Bahá'í Faith as one of several examples of inclusivism. While Huston Smith does not use the term in *The World's Religions,* a revised version of his popular textbook *The Religions of* Man, his discussion of the Bahá'í Faith would clearly place it in this category.74 There is also what appears to be direct scriptural evidence within the Bahá'í writings to support an inclusivist label. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written:

> *The Bahá'í Cause is an inclusive movement;* the teachings of all religions and societies are found here. . . . The Bahá'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.75

'Abdu'l-Bahá claims that the Baha'i Faith is not simply another religion, but "the ancient path," which his father, Baha'u'llah, describes as "the changeless Faith of God [Arabic: *din Alláh*], eternal in the past, eternal in the future."[76]

By reading these and other passages in isolation from the vast and overall context of the Baha'i sacred writings, one may find superficial support for characterizing the Bahá'í Faith as inclusivistic. However, the inclusivist label is far too simplistic. It does not adequately describe the complex, subtle, and multi-faceted Bahá'í position, especially as it is developed by Baha'u'llah in such works as the Kitab-i Íqán. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith continually frustrates such easy and simplistic classifications. For example, while Bahá'í theology might be described by some as liberal or conversely even radical, its strict moral standards might be characterized by others as conservative. While the Baha'i view does incorporate what might be considered to be inclusivistic elements, these elements must be understood in their relationship with other well-known Baha'i principles such as the concept of "the relativity of religious truth," the admonition to foster and preserve "unity in diversity," and the notion that the religions of the world are involved in a dynamic historical process, what Bahá'ís call "progressive revelation."

Modifications of the inclusivist position include perspectivist theories of religious pluralism, of which John Hick's theory, as he presents it in his recent book *An Interpretation of Religion,* is typical.77 Hick's perspectivism is grounded on the Kantian distinction made between *noumenon* and *phenomenon,* between an entity *an sich* ("in itself") as unperceived by anyone, and an entity as perceived by human beings. Consequently, Hick makes a distinction between ultimate reality *an sich* and ultimate reality as experienced and perceived by different religious traditions.78 Hick categorizes these varying perceptions into two broad categories: (1) the Real (Hick's general term for the absolute) understood as a deity or god, and as having a divine persona (e.g., Yahweh, Shiva, Vishnu, Ahura Mazda, Allah, God the Father, the Great Spirit, and so on), and (2) the Real understood as a non-personal Absolute, or as the ground of being, or as the animating force in the universe (e.g., the Taoist conception of the Tao, the varying

Mahayana Buddhist conceptions *ofdharma, shunyata,* or *nirvana,* the Advaita Vedanta conception of Brahman, or the Chinese understanding of Tien).

Armed with this distinction, Hick contends that the various understandings of ultimate reality propounded by the religions of the world are not incommensurate views but differing perspectives of the same reality. Accordingly, since reality is understood from a host of differing perspectives, we find among the world's religious traditions, a plurality of perceptions about reality. In summarizing his own position, Hick writes that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human."[79]

Having dealt with diverse understandings of ultimate reality, Hick proceeds to explain the apparent differences in metaphysical, cosmological, and eschatological conceptions of the world's religions by viewing all such matters as within the domain of what he calls "myth, mystery and unanswered questions."[80] For example, the doctrine of reincarnation, so essential to the religious traditions of India (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism), is conspicuously absent from the so-called Western religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá'í). Hick accounts for this difference by noting that it is the literal understanding of reincarnation that divides these traditions. However, if reincarnation is understood as a powerful metaphor, as myth, the differences between these two great religious traditions collapses. In Hick's words:

> The doctrine of reincarnation is seen by some as a mythological way of making vivid the moral truth that our actions have inevitable future consequences for good or ill, this being brought home to the imagination by the thought that the agent will personally reap those consequences in a future earthly life.81

Hick makes similar arguments for the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. Hick contends that all such exclusive sounding religious doctrines are susceptible to being interpreted metaphorically. This being the case, the exclusive character of all such apparent differences that arise from these doctrines would collapse, according to Hick. The allure of such an approach is indeed appealing.

On all of these matters, the Bahá'í concept of religious unity is essentially the same as Hick's.[82] Indeed, the Baha'i writings are filled with examples of how such doctrines as reincarnation, or the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, or the claim that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets, may be metaphorically interpreted in such a way as to lose their exclusive character. In other words, it is the literal interpretation of such doctrines, and not the doctrines themselves that results in the traditionally exclusive tone found in many religious traditions. For example, in 'Abdu'l-Baha's discussion of the resurrection of Christ, it is not the doctrine itself that is rejected, but rather the traditional literal interpretation of the resurrection story that is called into question.83 Some might object to this line of reasoning, citing 'Abdu'l-Baha's and Shoghi Effendi's clear rejection of reincarnation.[84] Given Hick's mythological interpretation of this and other such doctrines, could it not be argued that it is the literal understanding of such doctrines that is rejected in the Baha'i writings? Such a theological stance has obvious advantages since it removes, or at least lessens, the exclusive nature of such doctrines while honoring their profound mythological content.

Since it is very similar to Hick's perspectivist view, the Baha'i principle of religious unity is more appropriately characterized as a type of perspectivism. Baha'i perspectivism differs from Hick's insofar as his appears to operate in one direction only: from human beings to ultimate reality. The Bahá'í conception, however, operates in both directions: from human beings to the Absolute and from the Absolute to human beings. In other words, not only do human beings have different perspectives of God or ultimate reality but, according to the Bahá'í writings, God or ultimate reality also adapts or accommodates the understanding of Itself to the different historical periods and cultures of the world. Thus, implicit in the Baha'i principle of religious unity is the concept that religious truth is relative, that divine revelation is uniquely suited and adapted to the age, culture, and stage of human development in which it appears. For example, in referring to the various religions of the world, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that

> every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared.85

> That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.86

This concept is hardly unique to Baha'i theology; similar notions have been advanced by a number of thinkers. For example, in a recent essay, Rabbi Daniel Polish argues that God's revelation is

> . . conditioned by the circumstances and situations of each of the peoples to whom such disclosure was made. The one God is seen as having addressed each people in terms appropriate to that people. The various religious traditions are understood as the records and elaborations of those disclosures, in the languages, forms, symbols and constructs appropriate to each of the groupings of humankind.87

To summarize, the Baha'i principle of religious unity is perspectivism with a twist. The conventional meaning of perspectivism involves various responses to or perspectives of divinity made by the adherents and theologies of the world's religions. However, Baha'i perspectivism also entails the varying responses of the Absolute to humankind. In other words, a mutual process or hermeneutical circulation exists between religious communities and the Absolute; between the ever-evolving perspectives of divinity and religious truths on the one hand, and the adaptation of those truths by that same source of divinity or ultimate reality to particular societies and traditions on the other. Baha'i perspectivism incorporates a human-divine interaction similar to what W. C. Smith observes about religious communities the world over:

> . . . each of these processes has been and continues to be a divine-human complex. To fail to see the human element in any would be absurd; to fail to see the divine element in any would . . . be obtuse. (To fail to see the interrelatedness of all is, I suggest, old-fashioned.)[88]

The Baha'i approach to religious pluralism further parts ways with Hick over his assertion that the phenomenon of religion, in all its worldwide diversity, is best understood from a family resemblance model, after the usage of Ludwig Wittgenstein.[89] In this conception of religion, there are no essential characteristics, no common principles that every religion must have; there is no collective essence, no essential core, no sure foundation upon which all religions either share, agree in principle, or are founded upon. Instead, according to Hick, there is a continuum of characteristics "distributed sporadically and in varying degrees which together distinguish" the family of religious traditions from other families such as political movements or philosophical schools of thought.90

In contrast, the Baha'i view asserts the very things that a family resemblance model would deny: namely, that there are certain essential characteristics that all religions share. In this view, the religions of the world are "as differing species of the same genus," to borrow an insightful analogy from W. C. Smith.[91] For example, under the genus *Felis* falls a wide variety of cats, including both wild and domestic species. Despite differences in size, geographic distribution, and certain behaviors, all cats share many common characteristics such as their predatory behavior, carnivorous diet, and general physical appearance, which includes that most catlike of all features—whiskers-and, as any cat-lover well knows, an appealing aloofness. The world's religious traditions are understood in a similar way. While the religions of the world vary greatly, they share, according to the Baha'i conception, certain fundamental features including their common origin and their emphasis on the ability of faith to transform an individual profoundly.

With the preceding analogy in mind, it should be clear that the Baha'i principle of religious unity is best characterized as a type of perspectivism similar to the theory advocated by Hick. Baha'i perspectivism, does not, however, incorporate, as Hick's does, a family resemblance model. On the contrary, the Bahá'í view clearly holds that behind the seeming diversity of the world's religions there exist certain unifying features that they all have in common. For this reason, as I have already argued, the Baha'i view also shares certain similarities with the concept of the "transcendent unity of religions," which Schuon so persuasively argues. The Baha'i view is also similar to what Huston Smith terms the "primordial tradition."92 All these views have in common the assertion that behind the seeming diversity of the world's religious traditions lie both a common origin and certain universal truths.

In pulling together the various lines of my argument so far, it is readily apparent that the Baha'i principle of religious unity is best characterized as a modified inclusivist position that incorporates a perspectivist understanding of religious pluralism. This analysis is not complete, however, for the Baha'i view also includes, as a basic component, an historical understanding of the world's religions.

## THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY AND HISTORICAL PROCESS

"The world is in flux, and we know it," affirms Wilfred Cantwell Smith at the beginning of his thought-provoking book *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It is in this work that Smith persuasively argues for the importance of understanding religion within a dynamic historical context. "Like other aspects of human life," continues Smith, "the religious aspect too is seen to be historical, evolving, in process."[93] Thus, for Smith, the religious traditions of the world have been involved in a dynamic process of historical contact and mutual influence.

With the possible exception of Islam, the Baha'i Faith may be unique among the world's religious traditions in embracing the idea that religion must be understood historically.94 Indeed, within the Baha'i corpus, the religious traditions of the world are not seen as static and isolated events that sporadically appear. Rather, they are seen as participating in a progressive, dynamic, and never-ending process. Smith echoes the Baha'i view when he argues that the religious traditions of the world should be seen as active "participants in the world history of religion."[95] Not surprisingly, the Bahá'í conception of religious history is grounded in a process metaphysics. Indeed, in language reminiscent of that found in Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*,[96] 'Abdu'l-Baha affirms:

> Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. A moving object is a living object, whereas that which is motionless and inert is as dead. All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. The universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness.97

It follows directly from such an understanding of reality that the phenomenon of religion would be subject to the same dynamic process. 'Abdu'l-Baha thus continues:

> *Religion* is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and nonprogressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead. The divine institutes are continuously active and evolutionary; therefore, the revelation of them must be progressive and continuous. All things are subject to reformation.98

In a cyclical view, 'Abdu'l-Bahá likens the story of religion to a process of growth and decline similar to "the progression of the seasons of the year," with the beginning of each religion comparable to the beginning of spring.99 In similar fashion, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh often use the analogy of the rising and setting of the sun when explaining this concept.100 The point of these and similar references, too numerous to mention, is this: the Bahá'í Faith regards the religions of the world as participants in a dynamic, cyclical, and progressively unfolding process, what Bahá'ís call "progressive revelation."[101] This process both stimulates human civilization and keeps pace with it.

Following from the main lines of my argument, I can now reasonably substantiate the Bahá'í position that the religions of the world are to be regarded as participants in the successive unfoldment of the "ancient path of God" in which the Baha'i Faith is only one of the most recent participants and, by its own admission, not the final participant. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi points out that the Bahá'í Faith recognizes the religions of the world "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."[102]

The concept of progressive revelation provides the final factor for the analysis of the Baha'i concept of religious unity. Since the religions of the world have been successively revealed to an ever-advancing human civilization, many of the apparent differences between these religions are due to historical and cultural factors. In other words, the religious traditions of the world differ because the historical and cultural conditions have differed. Given this understanding, any discussion of religious pluralism would have to take the changing historical and cultural conditions into account, which is precisely what the Baha'i principle of religious unity does.

## DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVISM

In attempting to synthesize the various strands that comprise the Bahá'í principle of religious unity as elaborated above, it becomes apparent that no existing label or categorization is adequate. Baha'i doctrine combines elements of perspectivism and transcendent unity, while situating the various religious traditions within an unfolding and progressive historical process (i.e., "progressive revelation"). For these reasons, I have designated the Bahá'í doctrine of religious unity

a "dynamic perspectivism." Hopefully, such a designation will help to clarify the various misconceptions of the Bahá'í principle that a simplistic use of the current terminology perpetuates.

## CHALLENGES TO THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS UNITY

The greatest philosophical challenge to the Bahá'í principle of religious unity originates from the diverse group of current trends in philosophy and literary criticism that fall under the general heading of post-modernism. Radical pluralism may be seen as one such trend in the post-modern movement. When radical pluralists focus their attention on religion, they hold that even after one employs the kind of perspectivism advocated by the Bahá'í Faith, there remain "irreducible aspects," "mutually incommensurable insights," and stubbornly different doctrines and worldviews in every religious tradition that cannot simply be reduced to some "monolithic unity," intellectual abstraction, or ultimate reality.103 As I have previously argued, the Bahá'í writings do not claim that all the religions are the same. Important differences are in fact acknowledged. For instance, the Christian doctrine of incarnation and the corresponding Hindu concept of the *avatara* are rejected, together with all pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of the Divine.[104] What radical pluralists and others argue is that such differences are either largely ignored, viewed as relatively unimportant secondary or nonessential aspects, or worse, that such differences represent corrupt degenerations from some supposed pure or essential core of truth.105 Others, including many adherents of a deconstructive approach, go even further and deny the validity of any and all ultimate truths or the existence of some one absolute reality, ultimate being, or universal spirit. They reject what the French literary critic and founder of deconstruction Jacques Derrida terms the Western tradition of "onto-theology" or "foundationalism."[106]

Obviously, whether an ultimate truth exists or not, or whether truth is unitary or pluralistic, or whether differences are to be privileged or treated as secondary characteristics, are questions not open to proof either through the appeal to empirical evidence or conclusive arguments. Each view has gathered around it certain lines of reasoning which support its own perspective. It is clear to many that those who favor one view over the other do so not on the basis of any indisputable line of reasoning. Rather they do so on the basis of certain

presuppositions that bias them in one direction or the other. As Huston Smith simply puts it, "Everything turns on which foot one comes down on."[107] Consequently, this debate is, at least partly, a matter of emphasis. To be more specific, on the one hand, for those who emphasize differences, diversity is granted a privileged position and any unitary features are seen as less important or superficial. On the other hand, for those who presuppose the existence of some underlying universal truth, unitary principles are given a privileged position, while any differences that may be encountered are considered secondary or nonessential. Such considerations call to mind the classical Greek debate over "the one and the many."[108]

This debate may have less to do with meaningful philosophical issues and more to do with the tension that exists between what Schuon calls the esoteric and exoteric dimensions found within each religious tradition.[109] Schuon identifies the esoteric dimension as the inherently more mystical of the two, since it is characterized by a monistic realization of an inclusive, absolute, undifferentiated unity, or supreme identity that can only be spoken of through symbols and myths, allegories and metaphors. Accordingly, it is at the esoteric level that the concept of the unity of religions is realized. According to Schuon, while this realization is potentially available in any tradition or culture, only a small minority of people in any given tradition ever achieve it. In contrast, the exoteric dimension is concerned with doctrines and dogmas, outward forms, logical proofs, and concrete images. The exoteric level is characterized by a monotheistic or dualistic exclusivism that recognizes as correct one concrete form or expression over others. At the exoteric level, for example, Islam is proclaimed to be the only true religion. It is at this level that the world's religions are perceived to be both bewilderingly diverse and mutually exclusive.

Schuon sees the esoteric and exoteric dimensions as embodied in two distinct personality types found within all religious traditions, with the majority of religious adherents being exoteric. This is very similar to T. Patrick Burke's discussion of the "popular" or "devotional" (exoteric) and "reflective" (esoteric) aspects of religion.[110] Like Schuon, Burke argues that the reflective (esoteric) personality type has more in common with its counterparts in other religious traditions than its shared commonality with those within its own tradition. The same is true for the devotional (exoteric) personality. In other words, these distinctions cut across religions traditions.

Given Schuon's distinction, radical pluralism seems to belong more to the exoteric dimension, while views that advance religious unity belong more to the esoteric dimension. Since, for Schuon, these two dimensions of religion represent deeply felt approaches to religious life, it is doubtful whether the debate between radical pluralism and perspectivist views will ever be resolved. In its favor, the Baha'i unity paradigm, what I have characterized as a dynamic perspectivism, does have the advantage of fostering, at least among Bahá'ís, a deep appreciation and love for the worlds religious traditions. Bahá'u'lláh encourages his followers to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."[111] This attitude follows directly from the Baha'i doctrine of religious unity, for the adherents of the world's religious traditions are one's brothers and sisters in an ancient and progressively unfolding process of which the Baha'i Faith is only the most recent, and certainly not the last, development.

I close with Huston Smith's conclusion from his own defense of primordialism, remarks that apply likewise to what I have called the dynamic perspectivism of the Baha'i Faith:

> Some thinkers are so occupied with these differences that they dismiss claims of commonality as simply sloppy thinking, yet identity *within* difference is as common an experience as life affords. Green is not blue, yet both are light. A gold watch is not a gold ring, but both are gold. Women are not men, but both are human. . . . Blue is not red, but both are light. Exoterics can be likened to people who hold that light isn't truly such, or at least that it is not light in its purest form, unless it is of a given hue. Meanwhile academicians have become so fearful that a hue will be overlooked or that some that are known will become victimized-marginalized is the going word-that they deny the existence of light itself. There is nothing that hues instance and embody; nothing, in deconstructionist language, that texts signify. All that exists is an endless stream of signifiers.
>
> The primordialist believes there is such a thing as light in itself—pure white light that summarizes all the wave-lengths-and that it is the Light of the World.[112]

Smith's closing sentence echoes the words of Bahá'u'lláh when, in referring to the religions of the world, he proclaims:

> These principles and laws, these firmly established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.[113]

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, ***The Promised Day is Come*** (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) p. 119.

2. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, ***The World Order of Baha'u'llah: Selected Letters from Shoghi Effendi*** (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 39. Hans Kiing echoes this idea when he writes: "There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions." (Hans Kung, with Heinz Bechert, Josef van Ess, and Heinrich von Stietencron, ***Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.*** Trans. Peter Heinegg [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 19861 p. 443)

***3. Lawh-i*** *Maqsúd*, in ***Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the*** *Kitáb-i* ***Aqdas.*** Comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice. Trans. Habib Taherzadeh and a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) p. 168.

4. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, ***The Faith of Other Men (New*** York: Harper and Row, 1963) p. 127.

***5. Promised Day is Come,*** p. v.

6. John Hick notes that the principle of religious unity, whether inclusivistic or pluralistic is found "within each of the world's religions, although not as central themes." ("Religious Pluralism," ***Encyclopedia of Religion,*** Vol. 12, p. 331)

7. William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, ***The Baha'i Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*** (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) pp. 81-84.

8. Udo Schaefer, ***Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm*** (Prague: Zero Palm Press, 1995). Schaefer's book consists of two extended essays: "Time of the End or a New Era?" and "On the Diversity and Unity of Religions."

***9.*** In ***Some Answered Questions*** 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Buddha also established a new religion . . ." and ". . The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God . . ." (Comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney [Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 19811 p. 165). Obviously the modern nontheistic interpretation of Buddhism would be at odds with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that Buddha established the oneness of God.

10. For example, see Baha'u'llah, ***Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,*** trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) pp. 80, 158; Baha'u'llah, ***Tablets of Baha'u'llah,*** pp. 22, 87, 205; and Bahá'u'lláh, ***Kitab-i*** *Íqán:* ***The Book of Certitude,*** trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1950) p. 40.

11. Todd Lawson, letter to the author, May 28, 1992.

12. H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Krammers, eds., "Din" and "Milla", ***Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam,*** 1953.

13. F. Buhl and C. E. Bosworth, "Milla," *The New Encyclopedia of Islam,* 1990. The word *milla,* as far as I know, is not used in the Bahá'í writings.

14. From two letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers, dated July 28, 1936 and July 13, 1938, in *The Compilation of Compilations,* Vol. 1, #s 54 and 55, pp. 19-20.

15. In reference to the "Confucianists," 'Abdu'l-Baha attests that "Confucius renewed morals and ancient virtues . . ."; however, he goes on to argue that the beliefs and rites of the Confucianists have diverged greatly from the fundamental teachings of Confucius (*Some Answered Questions,* p. 165). In the so-called "Tablet of Purity," 'Abdu'l-Baha, while not mentioning the Sikhs by name, commends them as a community of people "far and away superior to others" due to their strict avoidance of alcohol, opium, and tobacco, as well as for their strength, courage, health, and physical beauty. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá,* comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh and a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre [Haifa, Israel: Baha'i World Centre, 19781, p. 150) In *Tablets of the Divine Plan,* 'Abdu'l-Baha compares the Native American Indians of today with the seventh-century pre-Islamic Arabs who, when inspired by the teachings of Muhammad, illumined the whole world." (rev. ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 19771 pp. 32-33)

16. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October *28,* 1949, in *Lights of Guidance,* #1375, p. 415.

17. For a thorough analysis of the identity of the Sabians, see Christopher Buck's essay "The Identity of the Sabi'un: An Historical Quest," *The Muslim World,* Vol. 74 (July-October, 1984) pp. 172-86.

18. Gibb, and Krammers, eds. *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam,* p. 477.

19. Buck undertakes an extensive analysis of these and other groups in "Identity of the Sabi'un."

20. Ibid., pp. 178-86.

21. Ibid., p. 186.

22. Barrett, David B. "World Religious Statistics," *1996 Britannica Book of the Year,* p. 298. See Fadil-i Mazandarani's *Amr va Khalq,* Vol. 2, pp. 45–46 for one of 'Abdu'l-Baha's references to the tribal religions.

23. The Baha'i concept of the "manifestation" of God is not one of divine incarnation (Ar. *hulul,* lit. "indwelling") where the essence of God descends into human form like the Christian concept of Christ or that of the *auatara* in the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism. Rather, the Bahá'í theology likens the manifestation of God to a perfectly polished mirror which reflects or manifests the attributes of God. Thus, in such a view, God remains utterly transcendent, above ascent or descent, incarnation or indwelling, while the Manifestation of God is understood as a unique human being capable of reflecting a perfect image of the attributes of God. Juan Ricardo Cole designates such a theology a *theophanology* or "manifestation theology" in his essay "The Concept of

Manifestation in the Baha'i Writings" *(Baha'i Studies,* No. 9 [Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 19821). J. A. McLean further elaborates Bahá'í manifestation theology in his essay "Prolegomena to a Baha'i Theology." (The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies,* Vol. 5, no. 1 119921, pp. 25-67)

*24.* Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989) p. 318.

*25. Journal of Bahá'í Studies,* Vol. 5, no. 3 (1993) pp. 17-40.

26. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions,* p. 43.

*27. Jesus in the Qur'an (New* York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 40. These twenty-eight prophets include Adam, Abraham, David, Elijah, Elisha, Enoch or Esdras? (Idras) Ezekiel, Ezra, Hud, Isaiah (?) Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Jesus, Job, John the Baptist, Jonah, Joseph, Lot, Luqman, Moses, Muhammad, Noah, Salih, Shu'ayb, Solomon, and Zachariah. The Baha'i writings also include the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, the Buddha, Confucius, Daniel, Jeremiah, Joel, Joshua, Krishna, and Zarathustra.

28. All quranic quotations are taken from 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ah's translation *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary,* rev. ed. 1934; (reprinted Brentwood, MD: Amana Corp., 1989).

*29.* Glasse, *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam,* p. 318.

30. Excerpt from the *Dalá'il-i Sab'ih,* in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb,* comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh and a committee at the Baha'i World Centre (Haifa, Israel: Baha'i World Centre, 1976) p. 125.

31. *World Order of Baha'u'llah,* p. 58.

*32. The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Baha during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912,* comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 454.

*33. Paris Talks,* 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) p. 53.

*34.* The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb,* p. 139 and Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,* p. 13.

*35. Kitab-i Íqán,* p. 153.

*36. The Kitab-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) p. 32, #35.

*37. The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984). Schuon's phrase "transcendent unity" appears occasionally throughout the English translations of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. See, for instance, *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah,* trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974) pp. 89, 192-93, 307, and 334.

*38. Transcendent Unity,* p. 17.

*39. Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1952) pp. 117-18.

40. Ibid., pp. 79–80.

41. ***The Fragile Universe*** (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979) pp. 40, 57.

***42. Gleanings,*** pp. 79-80, #34.

***43. Promulgation of Universal Peace,*** pp. 168-69, emphasis added.

***44. Paris Talks,*** pp. 120-21.

45. 'Abdu'l-Baha, ***Foundations of World Unity,*** pp. 92, 82.

46. The Bahá'í writings include among these virtues such traits as mercy, compassion, equity, trustworthiness, wisdom, knowledge (including scientific knowledge) courtesy, and kindness. So important is the acquisition of these virtues that when 'Abdu'l-Baha was asked in Paris, "What is the purpose of our lives?" he responded, "To acquire virtues." ***(Paris Talks,*** p. 177)

***47. An Znterpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*** (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1989) p. 316. Hick devotes the entire eighteenth chapter to demonstrating the universality of this point.

***48. Promulgation of Universal Peace,*** p. 151.

***49. Towards a World Theology,*** pp. 4–5.

***50. Primitive Mythology,*** Vol. 1 of ***The Masks of God (New*** York: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 32.

51. ***An Historian's Approach to Religion*** (London: Oxford University Press, 1956) p. 264.

52. For a comprehensive discussion of the importance of spiritual transformation and the acquisition of virtues within the Bahá'í tradition see Jack McLean's ***Dimensions in Spirituality*** (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995).

***53. Concise Encyclopedia of Islam,*** p. 187.

***54. Excerpts from the Writings of the Guardian on the Bahá'í Life,*** comp. the Universal House of Justice (N.c.: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, n. d.) pp. 18, 10, and ***Lights of Guidance,*** p. 418, #1139.

***55. Excerpts,*** p. 12.

56. Letter dated 8 December 1935 to an individual believer, in ***Compilation of Compilations,*** Vol. 2, #1762, p. 238, emphasis added.

57. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, September ***6,*** 1946, in ***Lights of Guidance,*** #1701, p. 505.

58. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, September ***30,*** 1949, in ***Lights of Guidance,*** #1159, p. 345.

59. Quoted in Vivekananda, ***Ramakrishna and His Message*** (Howra, India: Swami Adhayananda, 1971) p. 25.

60. For a full account of this analogy, see Ronald Eyer's illuminating discussion in his book ***Ronald Eyre on the Long Search: His Own Account of a Three-Year Journey*** (Cleveland: William Collins, 1979) pp. 275-76.

61. ***Problems of Religious Pluralism (New*** York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) pp. 36-37.

***62. Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna,*** compiled by Swami Abhedananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975) p. 248, #686 and p. 251, #694.

***63. The Meaning and End of Religion (New*** York New American; 1963) p. 168.

64. Ibid., p. 51ff.

65. "Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations," *Religion and Intellectual Life,* Vol. 4, no. 4 (Summer 1987) pp. 9 and 8.

66. Mark Jurgensmeyer, Review of *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism,* ed. Harold G. Coward (State University of New York Press, 1987) in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* Vol. 56, no. 4 (Winter, 1988) p. 773. In this review, Jurgensmeyer notes that in "the recently revised version of Claude Welch and John Dillenberger's *Protestant Christianity,* the authors have added a new concluding chapter describing what they regard as the most significant new trend in Protestant thought: theologies of religious pluralism."

67. *Meaning and End of Religion,* p. 170.

68. "Religious Pluralism," *Encyclopedia of Religion,* Vol. 12, pp. 331. In his book *Towards a World Theology,* Wilfred Cantwell Smith similarly writes: "Religious diversity is a problem within, as well as among, [religious] communities." (p. 23)

69. "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge" in *Religious Pluralism,* ed. Leroy S. Rouner, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) p. 98. I have modified Panikkar's list by giving his six options a name after the usage of John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others.

70. J. A. McLean, "Prolegomena to a Baha'i Theology," pp. 53-57.

71. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 58.

72. *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow: A Selection from the Writings of Shoghi Effendi* (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1953) p. 118.

73. *World Order of Baha'u'llah,* p. 115. The italicized portion of this passage is a quotation from Baha'u'llah found in the *Kitab-i Íqán,* p. 137.

74. *Living Religions,* 2d. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994) p. 386 and *The World's Religions: A Completely Revised and Updated Edition of the Religions of Man* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) p. 385.

75. Quoted in Pritam Singh, "The Scriptures of Different Faiths," in *God, His Mediator, and Man* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958) p. 14; emphasis added. This and other such scriptural references predate the recent scholarly approaches to religious pluralism as well as the formal definitions of religious exclusivism and inclusivism.

76. Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i Aqdas,* p. 85, #182.

77. See "Part Four: Religious Pluralism" in *An Interpretation of Religion.* Hick also discusses perspectivism in Chapter 3 of his *Problems of Religious Pluralism* and Chapter 3 of *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

78. Ibid., pp. 240ff. Armed with this distinction Hick contends that the various understandings of ultimate reality propounded by the religions of the world are not incommensurate views but differing perspectives of the same reality. Moojan Momen has previously discussed the similarity between

Hick's view and the Bahá'í position. See "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics," in *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions,* Vol. 5 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988) pp. 207-208.

79. *Problems of Religious Pluralism,* pp. 36-37.

80. See Chapter 19 of *An Znterpretation of Religion.*

81. Ibid., p. 349. Hick cites a number of Buddhists who hold this view, including such notable thinkers as the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (p. 376, note 9).

82. For example, many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations of apparently exclusive religious concepts depend on metaphorical interpretations. See, for instance, *Some Answered Questions.*

83. *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 103-106.

84. Some Bahá'ís might challenge the metaphorical or mythical view of reincarnation by holding to the stricter theological interpretation based on 'Abdu'l-Baha's explanation that the belief in reincarnation is erroneous. For references to reincarnation, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 282-88, and Shoghi Effendi's interpretations in *Lights of Guidance,* ns. 1820, p. 536 and 1826, p. 538.

85. *Gleanings,* p. 81, #34.

86. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,* p. 13.

87. "Understanding Religious Pluralism," *Religion and Intellectual Life,* Vo14, no. 4 (Summer 1987) p. 56.

88. *Towards a World Theology,* p. 34.

89. *An interpretation of Religion,* pp. 3ff. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963). Hick points out that the term "cluster concepts" is a synonymous term.

90. Ibid., p. 4.

91. *Towards a World Theology,* p. 52.

92. See Smith's article "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim," *Cross Currents,* Vol. 38, no. 3 (Fall 1988) pp. 276-88 and Chapter 3 of his *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

93. P. 2.

94. I stress here the idea of the religious tradition itself, rather than the work of scholars. One of the central foci of *Religionswissenshaft* is to view religion historically.

95. Ibid., p. 20.

96. Bergson is considered the founder of process philosophy, an early 20th-century movement in philosophy that also claims such thinkers as Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Teilhard de Chardin.

97. From a public lecture given at the Free Religious Association, Boston, Mass., May 24, 1912, in *Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p. 140.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid., pp. 126-27, from a talk given at the Church of the Divine Paternity, New York City, May 19, 1912.

100. The Báb, *Persian Bayan* 4:12, in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 106; Baha'u'llah, *Kitáb-i Íqán*, pp. 21-22, 160-61.

101. For the specific occurrence of the phrase "progressive revelation," see Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, pp. 74-75, #31. In this same passage, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the world's religions as links in a "chain of successive revelations." In *Towards a World Theology*, W. C. Smith suggests that the image of a flowing river may help communicate the dynamic and fluid process in which the world's religions are involved. (p. 26)

102. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 114.

103. This initial definition is largely taken from Raimundo Panikkar's essay "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge."

104. For references to the rejection of the incarnation doctrine, see Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, p. 49, #20, Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 112-13, and *Lights of Guidance*, #1699, p. 504. For similar references on anthropomorphism and pantheism, see two letters written on behalf of the Shoghi Effendi, dated April 21, 1939 and October 26, 1932, in *Lights of Guidance*, #1574, p. 477 and #1583, p. 479.

105. Cultural anthropologist Michael Fischer makes an argument typical of this type of criticism in his analysis of the Bahá'í community of Yazd in "Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: The Bahá'ís of Yazd" in Heshmat Moayyad, ed. *The Bahá'í Faith and Islam*, Proceedings of a Symposium, McGill University, March 23-25, 1984 (Ottawa, Canada: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990) pp. 25-55.

106. See Purusottama Bilimoria, "A Problem for Radical (onto-theos) Pluralism," *Sophia*, Vol. 30, no. 1 (1991) pp. 21-33. For a well-written evaluation of Derrida's views, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) especially Chapter 2. For works by Derrida, *see Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

107. *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, p. 35.

108. See Plato's *Parmenides* or Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book X, Chapter 3.

109. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, chapters 2 and 3.

110. *The Fragile Universe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 19791 pp. 79-92.

111. *Lawh-i Dunya*, in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 87.

112. *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, p. 35; and "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim," p. 288.

113. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13.

# THE BACKGROUND AND CENTRALITY OF APOPHATIC THEOLOGY IN BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í SCRIPTURE

*Stephen N. Lambden*

> God *(ḥaqq)* in His Essence (*bi-dhátihi*) and in His Own Self *(bi-nafsihi)* hath ever been unseen, inaccessible and unknowable.
>
> —Bahá'u'lláh
>
> *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*

Born out of a concern with the ultimate Godhead/Reality/Truth, the precise origins of the concept of the incomprehensible-unknowable God are both complex and uncertain. The idea has multifaceted, sometimes interrelated roots in, for example, Greek philosophical sources, Hellenistic Judaism, and gnostic mythologies as well as the writings of key Christian apologists and Fathers. There are possibly related dimensions of this *via negativa* in non-Semitic, Asian, and other religious and philosophical sources.[1] This paper will trace aspects of the history of the theological position of the unknowablility of God in select Abrahamic religions and will highlight its significance for the Bahá'í Faith. It should become clear that the Bahá'í theological position, far from being new or unique in all its aspects, is rooted in the propositions of past religious and philosophical thinkers.

In his Kitab-i Íqán (1861–62), Bahá'u'lláh clearly acknowledges the past realization of the incomprehensibility of the ultimate Reality:

> All the Prophets of God (*anbiyá'*) and their chosen Ones (*awsiyá'*), all the divines (*'ulamá*), the sages (*'urafá*), and the wise of every generation (*ḥukamá'*), unanimously recognize their inability to attain unto the comprehension of that Quintessence of all truth (*jawhar al-jawáhir*), and confess their incapacity to grasp Him, Who is the inmost Reality of all things (*ḥaqíqat al-ḥaqá'iq*).[2]

The Bahá'í *via negativa* is most directly rooted in Bábí theology and in those Islamic, Shí'í, and Shaykhi texts which have apophatic (i.e., negative) theological dimensions. Any student of the Bábí and Baha'i religions will readily come to realize that the doctrine of the unknowability of the ultimate Godhead is foundational. One can only say what God is not or use negative theological (apophatic) language when referring to God. The incomprehensibility of the nature of the divine Essence (*dhát; dhát al-dhát*) is frequently celebrated in Bábí and Bahá'í scripture; in the extensive Arabic and Persian writings of Sayyid 'Ah Muhammad, the Báb (1819–1850), and Mírzá Husayn 'Ah, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892). In their writings, apophatic language is quite frequent.3 No Baha'i systematic theology could be written without locating the essence of divinity beyond the infinite cosmos and totally beyond human knowledge.

Any Baha'i theology would, however, identify the Manifestation of God as the locus of God's indirect "knowability." While the divine Essence is the center of negative theology, the person of the Manifestation of God, who is born from age to age to communicate the divine Will to humankind, is the center of a positive, affirmative (cataphatic) theology of the nearness and knowability of God. It is by virtue of this doctrine that the divine immanence is realized without incarnation but through the perfect manifestation of the divine Names and Attributes in nature, in humanity, and in the loving parenthood of the Manifestations or Messengers of God.

The Bábí–Bahá'í doctrine of the unknowability of God is not a bloodless theological abstraction emphasizing cold remoteness, but rather one which points to and celebrates the truth of the fact that through the Messengers an intimate nearness to God can be realized. Through God's divine representatives, the Manifestations, God is closer to human beings than their, "jugular vein." (Q. 50: 16b) By virtue of the Manifestation of God, the divine "image" lies deep within the soul of every individual. The absolute deity ever remains, however, outside the scope of the human universe of discourse.

## JUDAISM

> Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, 0 God of Israel, the Saviour.
>
> -Isaiah 45:15

The Hebrew Bible does not contain a systematic theogony, theology, or theodicy. It champions the oneness and supremacy of the inconceivable yet personal, universal God of Israel (Hebrew: 'Eloha, 'Elohim, YHWH=Yahweh, etc.). Though hardly directly spelled out in Hebrew scripture, the belief that the nature or essence of God is unfathomable came to be paramount in Jewish religious thought. Implying that God is incomparable, Isaiah posed the rhetorical question: "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him" (Isa 40:18). Indeed, he states that no likeness can be made of the invisible God of Israel (Exod 20:4) who created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1ff).

The absence of images of God in the ancient Israelite cult has been reckoned a "most striking feature."[4] In referring to the God of Israel as One supremely, One thrice "holy" (Hebrew: *qadosh),* the implication is that God is One distinctly "set apart."[5] Direct vision of this transcendent God who dwells in "thick darkness" (Hebrew: *araphel;* Exod 20:21; I Rings 8: 12) is denied Moses and other human beings (Exod 33:20; Jud 13:22): "The Lord reigns. . . . Clouds and thick darkness are round about him . . ." (Psalm 97:2). Moses himself was refused direct vision of God's "face" (Exod 33:18ff). It has sometimes been reckoned that the mysterious hiddenness of this Self-Existent God is reflected in God's terse Self-designation (in the RSV loose translation) "I AM WHO I AM" (Hebrew: *'ehyeh 'usher 'ehyeh;* Exod 3:14).

During the second Temple period (6th–1st century BCE), reverence for the transcendent God was greatly underlined. Biblical anthropomorphisms were often avoided or reinterpreted. Both the writing and the uttering of God's personal divine name YHWH ('Yahweh") came to be strictly outlawed. It was indirectly pronounced, that is vowelled, as *'Adonai* ("Lord"). The Qumran Jewish faction, sometimes identified with the Essenes, which preserved the "Dead Sea Scrolls," at some stage observed a Community Rule *(Serek ha-yaḥad,* 1QS. c. 100? BCE) in which the following rather extreme guideline is contained:

> If any man has uttered the [Most] Venerable Name even though frivolously, or as a result of shock or for any other reason whatever, while reading the Book or praying, he shall be dismissed and shall return to the Council of the Community no more.6

Certain Jewish thinkers and various Christian biblical exegetes found hints of God's unknowability in the Hebrew Bible. In *A Jewish Theology,* Louis Jacobs states that in the history of Jewish religious thought there is "a definite tendency among some thinkers to negate all attributes from God. He is to be described, if He is to be described at all, as unknowable."7

The Jewish philosopher and scriptural exegete Philo of Alexandria Judaeus (c. 20 BCE–c. 50 CE) "has some claim to be called the Father of negative theology."8 In his allegorical interpretation of the Greek Septuagint, he often had reason to underline the supreme transcendence and unknowability of the God of Israel, "the Existent" (Greek: to *on;* cf. Plato *Timaeus* 27Df; see De. Som. I:67; De Mut. nom. 10; De post. Caini, 169, etc.). Human beings can grasp the truth of the existence of God but not the nature of the unknowable Being: "Do not . . . suppose that the Existent that truly exists is apprehended by any man. . . . why should we wonder that the Existent cannot be apprehended by men when even the mind in each of us is unknown to us?"9

Though Philo found many scriptural indications of God's unknowability, he yet held that God is indirectly knowable through divine works and powers (*dynameis*), through the intermediaries of "Logos," "Idea," and "Angel." While Philo gave great weight to the ultimate unknowability of God, his ontology and anthropology neither rule out the human ecstatic mystical experience of the Godhead nor the vision of God's blinding Light.10

The largely occasional rabbinic perspectives extant in the Midrashic and Talmudic literatures (1st cent. BCE-6th cent. CE) contain relatively little precise theological speculation. A few references that approach a "theology of negation" have been registered by Louis Jacobs. He notes, for example, that the Palestinian teacher R. Abin said: "When Jacob of the village of Neboria was in Tyre, he interpreted the verse, 'For Thee, silence is praise, 0 God' (Psalm 65:2) to mean that silence is the ultimate praise of God."11

Influenced by Neoplatonism, many of the medieval Jewish philosophers proposed a negative theology. They held the belief that God transcends all human knowledge and experience. In discussing

the significance of the unity *of God* in *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart,* Bahya ibn Pakuda (c. 1050-c. 1156?) propounds such a negative theology. Human beings should negate from God all human and finite limitations and hold that God is unknowable, beyond human comprehension: "The essence of your knowledge of Him, 0 my brother, is your firm admission that you are completely ignorant of His true essence."[12]

In his *Guide for the Perplexed,* the great Spanish Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Mosheh ben Maimon, c. 1135–1204) dwelt at length on aspects of a negative theology of the nature or essence of God. For him, talk about attributes of the divine nature was tantamount to polytheism. Even negative attributes cannot be befittingly predicated of God:

> In the contemplation of His essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient; in the examination of His works, how they necessarily result from His will, our knowledge proved to be ignorance, and in the endeavour to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure.13

The Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, partly rooted in antiquity, upholds an esoteric theology in which the ultimate Godhead, *En Sof* (without limit) is unknowable and incomprehensible. The Infinite without name and beyond attribute is one with, though beyond, the emanated ten *Sefirot* (Spheres) which are his instruments in both the seen and unseen cosmos. Writing about God in the Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem has stated:

> From the sayings of some early kabbalists, it is apparent that they are careful not even to ascribe personality to God. Since He is beyond everything-beyond even imagination, thought, or will-nothing can be said of him that is within the grasp of our thought.14

## CHRISTIANITY

As with the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literatures, the New Testament does not contain a systematic doctrine of God (Greek: *theos; kyrios*="Lord"). The word *trinity* is not found, nor is there a sustained deification of Jesus of Nazareth. The Galilean Messiah frequently spoke intimately of the God of the Hebrew Bible as the divine "Father" (Aramaic: *Abba*) though he did not compromise his exalted

transcendence. Certain Pauline and pseudo-Pauline letters uphold the divine transcendence (e.g., -1 Cor. 15:28c; 1 Tim 6:16).[15] The Fourth Gospel records that God cannot be visioned; "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18a). As a divine manifestation, however, Christ the "Son" has indirectly "made him [God the Father] known" (Jn 1:18b, cf. Jn 6:46).

Due to limitations of space, full details of the numerous testimonies to the incomprehensibility and unknowability of God in the early Christian centuries cannot possibly be registered here. What follows is consequently only a highly selective set of notes. Along with other Abrahamic religious traditions, the Christian doctrine of the unknowability of God is closely associated with the assimilation of various eclectic forms of Middle and Neoplatonic philosophy. It was in part due to this influence that a negative definition of God "appears occasionally and incidentally among the apostolic fathers . . . and is a significant feature among the apologists."[16] Like Philo, various early Christian apologists use such negative theological epithets as "uncreated," "uncontained," "unnameable."[17] By doing so, they underlined the transcendence of Almighty God.

From the early second century **CE,** occasional and then numerous Christian writers variously held to a negative theology. The "incomprehensibility" of God was widely affirmed. The partially preserved apocryphal *Preaching of Peter* (*Kerygma Petrou,* 110? CE) contains one of the earliest explicit Christian references to God being "incomprehensible," the "Incomprehensible who comprehends all things."[18]

Certain early gnostic groups viewed the ultimate Godhead as One unknown. He is the "Wholly Other" not responsible for this material domain of darkness. Such is the basic theodicy of many gnostic groups.[19] Presenting itself as a revelation of "the mysteries" by Jesus the Savior to John Son of Zebedee, *The Apocryphon of John,* one of the Nag Hammadi texts, for example, opens with an extended negative theology.[20] The early gnostic *theologia negatiua* has been thought to be "an anticipation of the speculations of the Church Fathers, especially of the mystics among them."[21]

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) was perhaps the most important second-century apologist. He states that God "the Father" is "nameless" and "unbegotten" and adds: "The name Christ . . . contains an unknown significance, just as the title 'God' is not a name, but represents the idea, innate in human nature, of an inexpressible reality."[22]

Christ the "Logos" is a subordinate deity distinguished from the ultimate unknowable Godhead. He is a "visible God"-God born from God, like fire lit from another fire or light radiating from the Sun.23

While in the late 170s CE, Athenagoras of Athens in his *Presbeia* (Supplication) refers to "the One God" as "incomprehensible,"24 Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (d.c. 180 CE), in his *Ad Autoclycum* (To Autolycus) declared: "The form of God ineffable . . . in glory He is uncontainable, in greatness incomprehensible, in height inconceivable."25

The famed author of the anti-gnostic *Adversus haeresus* (Against the Heresies), Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (fl. c. 115–190), spoke of Christ the Logos as the Mediator of revelation. The Son (Jesus) "safeguarded the invisibility of the Father (God)," for the invisible, incomprehensible God in his "true nature and immensity cannot be discovered or described by his creatures."[26]

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215) reckoned God both one and beyond oneness, a transcendent deity that human thoughts can never fathom. He reckoned Moses a true gnostic (*gnostikos*) since he did not attempt to "encompass" the transcendent God Who "cannot be encompassed," and since he did not set up any representative "statue" of God in the "sanctuary" (the Holy Place/Holy of Holies, at the centre of the Tabernacle or Jerusalem Temple), "thus making it clear that God is a mystery, invisible and illimitable."27 Like Philo then, Clement and other apologists specifically refer to God as "unknowable" (Greek: *akataleptos*).[28]

Son of a Christian martyr, the erudite Origen (c. 185-c. 254), perhaps the most prolific and learned of the fathers of the Church, in his *De Principiis* (On First Principles) and other works, propounds a primarily negative theology. He asserts that, without doubt, God is "incomprehensible and immeasurable," beyond the grasp of the human mind.29 God comprehends all things but is comprehended by none among creation. Human minds cannot behold God as He is in Himself.30

Like Origen, Plotinus (205–270), founder of Neoplatonism, studied under Ammonius Saccas (d.c. 242), an Alexandrian ex-Christian reconciler of Plato and Aristotle who had an interest in Persian religion. Plotinus settled in Rome around 245 and subsequently composed his fifty-four treatises known, after their grouping by his disciple Porphry (d. 304), as the *Enneads* ("Nines"; 6x9=54). He was an important and key source of negative and mystical theology,[31] for he raised these concepts to "philosophical respectability."[32] Among his teachings is that

the divine exists in a "Triad" of "entities" (*hypostases*), the highest degree of which, the "One," transcends *psyche* (Soul) and *nous* (Intellect), is unknowable, beyond human thoughts, essence, existence, and oneness.[33] It can only be inadequately described negatively.34

The adoption of consubstantial *(homoousios)* trinitarianism by more than 300 largely Eastern Christian bishops at the Council of Nicaea (325) did not prevent most Church Fathers from continuing to champion the absolute mystery of the Godhead. The doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God was not eclipsed by either a literalist incarnationalism nor a trinitarianism of "substance" (*ousia*). Writing in the Platonic and Alexandrian tradition, the influential bishop and theologian Athanasius (d. 377), a youthful champion of Nicean orthodoxy and anti-Arianism, in his *Letter to the Monks* (358), wrote: ". . . even if it is impossible to grasp what God is, yet it is possible to say what he is not."[35]

The various major Cappadocian theologians of the fourth century spoke variously about the incomprehensibility of God. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395?), for example, regarded the heights of mystical contemplation as the realization of the incomprehensibility of God. His writings, which were influenced by Neoplatonic works, laid the foundation of a "mysticism of darkness" based upon an exegesis of Moses' Sinaitic ascent (Exodus 24: 15ff). This mysticism of darkness is related to the three stages of: (1) being in the "light" (*phos*), purification; (2) being in the "cloud" (*nephele*), contemplation of intelligibles; and (3) being in the "darkness" (*gnophos;* Exod. 20:21), which corresponds to the termination of knowledge before the ultimate inaccessibility of God and the mystical ascent through divine love: "Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect he saw God in the darkness."36

Among the many illuminating passages in the writings of Gregory, it must suffice to quote a brief extract from his marvellous exegetical treatise *On the Life of Moses:*

> What then does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? [Exod 20:21] . . as the mind progresses, through an even greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence

> thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says No *one has euer seen God,* [John 1: 18] thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men by every intelligent creature.
>
> When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, *Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.* What God? He who *made darkness his hidingplace* as David says [Psalm 17:12] who was initiated into the mysteries in the same inner sanctuary.37

Referring to Psalm 138:6 and other biblical texts, Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) warned that it is "presumptuous to claim to know what is God's essence (*ousia*)."[38] A number of homilies on the "Incomprehensible nature of God" (*Peri akatalepton*) are extant from the great orator and one-time bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, the "golden mouth" (c. 354–407).[39] John quite categorically taught that God in His transcendent majesty is completely beyond the comprehension of even the higher angels, let alone weak, mortal humanity:

> We call Him [God] the inexpressible, the unthinkable God, the invisible, the inapprehensible; who quells the power of human speech and transcends the grasp of mortal thought; inaccessible to the angels, unbeheld by the Seraphim, unimagined by the Cherubim, invisible to the rules and authorities and powers, and, in a word, to all creation.40

Though not exactly a proponent of negative theology, the influential Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) advised when talking about God: "Put everything from your mind; whatever occurs to you deny it . . . say, He is not that."[41]

The writings of the unknown philosopher-monk Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. c. 500, cf. Acts 17:34) present a synthesis of Christian doctrines and neoplatonic thought. Perhaps of Syrian provenance, they are very important texts in the history of Christian mysticism. Lossky reckoned that they "have enjoyed an undisputed authority in the theological tradition of the East, as well as that of the West."[42]

Following Proclus (d. c. 487), Pseudo-Dionysius seems to have been the first Christian thinker to have made use of the theological terms *apophatic* (negative theology) and *cataphatic* (affirmative theology).[43] They subsequently became familiar terms in Byzantine theology, from the time of the Greek theologians Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) and John Damascene (d. c. 749).[44] For Pseudo-Dionysius, "the reference of both apophatic and cataphatic theology is the One God. . . . It is of the same God that we are to make both affirmations and denials."[45] For Pseudo-Dionysius, God in Himself is beyond the God we know through cataphatic theology. God is more adequately "known" through apophatic theology, the paradoxical mystical theology of denial or unknowing:

> God is known in all things and apart from all things; and God is known by knowledge and by unknowing. Of him there is understanding, reason, knowledge, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name and many other things, but he is not understood, nothing can be said of him, he cannot be named. He is not one of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are; he is all things in everything and nothing in anything; he is known to all from all things and to no-one from anything. For we rightly say these things of God, and he is celebrated by all beings according to the analogy that all things bear to him as their Cause. But the most divine knowledge of God, that in which he is known through unknowing, according to the union that transcends the mind, happens when the mind, turning away from all things, including itself, is united with the dazzling rays, and there and then illuminated in the unsearchable depth of wisdom.46

The first chapter of Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Mystical Theology* poses the question: "What is the Divine darkness?" and opens with a beautiful prayer in which the supplicant says:

> . . Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of Gods Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.47

Mystical union with God is only possible in terms of the darkness of "unknowing" (*agnósia*). It is never an actual or complete union with the unnameable God, the transcendent divinity beyond Being (*huperousios*). This work and others in the Dionysian corpus have had a major influence upon a range of key Christian thinkers and mystics,

many of whom made significant theological statements about the incomprehensibility of God.

At the end of the Patristic period, John of Damascus (d. 749) taught that positive statements about God do not reveal God's nature. Nothing can be said about God beyond what has been indicated in revelation. In his *On the Orthodox Faith* (I.4), he states that the existence of God is clear though God's nature is incomprehensible: ". . . what He is by His essence and nature, this is altogether beyond our comprehension and knowledge."[48] The Irish theologian and Neoplatonist philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (d. c. 875) translated the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin and gave a central place to apophatic theology. Scotus Eriugena mediated apophatic theology to the theologians of the Latin Middle Ages, who frequently voice the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. The same doctrine was also upheld by the Christian Scholastics and by notable reformist theologians.

In his *Summa Theologica*, the Italian Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) discussed whether or not God is the object of the science of theology. He noted that theology does "not start by making the assumption of defining God; as St John Damascene remarks, *In God we cannot* say *what he is.*"[49] In various of his works, Aquinas echoes his words: "What God actually is always remains hidden from us. And this is the highest knowledge one can have of God in this life, that we know Him to be above every thought that we are able to think of Him."[50]

The unknown English, possibly Carthusian, author of the mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th cent.) gave preeminence to spiritual love in the quest for experience of the unknowable Godhead beyond reason. Much influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius (Saint Denis), already cited as having said, "The truly divine knowledge of God is that which is known in unknowing," *The Cloud of Unknowing* states that the mystic quest is beyond both intellectual study and the imaginative faculty. In the humble lifting up of the heart to God, one finds a "cloud of unknowing," for "this darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in your affection."[51]

The German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) wrote a treatise *On Learned Ignorance* (1440). Much influenced by Dionysius and Erigena, he reckoned "learned ignorance" to be the most advanced

stage of knowledge. Cusa upheld this understanding in the light of the unknowability of absolute truth and of the Godhead beyond names and positive attributes. He regarded negative theology as fundamental.

Martin Luther (d. 1546) frequently referred to the All-Powerful God as hidden, *Deus Absconditus* (hidden God) "in distinction from the *Deus Revelatus* (revealed God) as still a *hidden* God in view of the fact that we cannot fully know Him even through His special revelation."[52]

Having bypassed many important Christian thinkers due to the limitations of space, we mention a few more recent influential thinkers. Best known for his monumental *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* Vladimir Lossky (d. 1958) is widely recognized as having been a preeminent Russian Orthodox *émigré* writer. He considered negative theology *(apophasis)* to be normative in Christian dogmatic reflection.53

The influential Swiss Reformed Protestant theologian Karl Barth (d. 1968), in his incomplete though massive *Church Dogmatics* (1927>), devotes a section to "Limits of the knowledge of God,"[54] the basic "Hiddenness of God." A useful sketch of the history of the Christian affirmation of the *incomprehensibilitas Dei* is registered. The unknowability of God has a "basic and determinate position" relative to those doctrines surrounding the knowledge of God.[55]

Finally, in this connection it may be noted that in the article "Trinity" in the recent *Encyclopedia of Religion,* the incomprehensibility of God is clearly stated: "First, God is an ineffable and Absolute Mystery, whose reality cannot adequately be comprehended or expressed by means of human concepts."[56]

## ISLAM

The Arabic word *alláh* (probably a contraction of *al* + *iláh*, "the deity") is the Islamic proper name indicative of the Essence of God occurring over 2,500 times in the Qur'an (ca. 610-632). It is basically the same as several of the biblical Hebrew and other Semitic designations of God (e.g., Hebrew: *El, Eloah, Elohim).* According to Gardet, the term *alláh* describes God "in his inaccessible nature as a deity both unique and one (*tawḥíd*) whose essence remains unrevealed."[57] Without bypassing the divine providential immanence, the Qur'an repeatedly underlines God's transcendence. It refers, for example, to God's great exaltation above limited theological and other modes of human understanding. God is "above and beyond all categories of

human thought and imagination, for He is "beyond all that they describe [of Him]." (Q. 6:100b)[58] He is one who "cannot be comprehended by vision" (Q. 6:101): "Vision comprehendeth Him not, but He comprehendeth [all] vision." God is incomparable: "There is naught like unto Him." (Q. 42:11; cf. 16:60; 32:27) God is supremely "All-High," "Transcendent," or "Exalted" (*al-'alíy*). (Q. 4:34; 22:62; 31:30)

In Islamic theosophy and mysticism as well as in Bábí and Bahá'í texts, the Arabic letter "H" (*há'*) is sometimes taken to indicate the divine essence (*al-dhát*) or hiddenness of God and is given a range of qabbalistic, cosmological, and esoteric significances. It is, for example, the first letter of the personal pronoun "He/It is" (*huwa*) and the last letter in the word *alláh* (God).[59] The Arabic third-person masculine pronoun *huwa* ("He/It [God] is") is many times used of God (*alláh*) in the Qur'an. An extended form of it, *huwiyya* (lit., "He-ness") indicates the divine self-identity or ipseity.[60] In medieval and later Islamic mysticism, as well as in numerous Bábí and Bahá'í texts, it is used to denote the transcendent divinity or the exalted Manifestation of God.61 For Shaykh Muyí al-Din Ibn al-'Arabí (d. 1270), it indicated the divine Essence: "*huwiyya* ("He-ness") signifies the Unseen Reality" *(al-haqiqat al-ghaybiyya)*[62]; the "Reality [*al-ḥaqíqat*] in the world of the Unseen."63 In his *Iṣṭiláḥát* (Sufi Lexicon), Ibn 'Arabí also interpreted *Hú* (He) to signify "the Unseen [God] *(al-ghayb)* Whom it is not fitting to observe."[64]

There is a section on *huwiyya* ("He-ness") in the important al-*Insán al-kámil (The Perfect Man)* of 'Abd al-Karím al-Jili (d. c. 1428). This Persian Shí'í Sufí writes in this work:

> The Ipseity of the True One (God; *huwiyya al-ḥaqq*): this indicates His hiddenness (*ghayb*), the manifestation of which is impossible save by means of the totality of the [Divine] Names and Attributes. This since their Reality alludeth unto the interiority of the Divine Uniqueness (*báṭin al-wáḥidíya*); it alludeth unto His Being (*kun*) and His Essence (*dhát*) by means of His Names and Attributes: "The Ipseity (*al-huwiyya*) is the Hiddenness of the Divine Essence which is Uniquely One (*wáḥid*)."[65]

Also related to the Arabic letter *há'* ("h") and *huwa* ("He is") is the designation of the divine Essence, *Láhút* (loosely, "the sphere of the Divine Ipseity"). Traditionally, it lies "above" and "beyond" the ever more elevated succession of spheres or "worlds," (1) *Násút* ("this Mortal World"); *(2) Malakút* ("the world of the angels or the Kingdom

[of God]"); (3) *Jabarút* ("the sphere of the divine decrees or celestial Powers"); (4) *Láhút* ("the realm of the Divine theophany"). The term *Háhút* is modelled on the names of these "realms," which are themselves rooted in Christian Aramaic/Syriac theological terminology.66 References to *Háhút* are found in the writings of Muslim theosophical writers and mystics. It indicates the inaccessible sphere of the wholly Other, the divine Essence.

The Qur'an accords God various "Names" as being indicative of the divine perfections. Certain of these quranic "Names of God" are traditionally reckoned among the ninety-nine "Most Beautiful Names [of God]" (*al-asmá' al-ḥusná*, see Q. 20:8). A few of them indicate the divine unknowability, just as others refer to the divine immanence. Of obvious relevance to the former is God's being *al-ghayb* (the Mystery, the Unseen), which occurs a number of times in the Qur'an.67 Relevant also is the *hapax Zegomenon* ("once occurring") and divine attribute, the name *Ṣamad* (loosely, "Impenetrable," "Eternal," "Everlasting"), which occurs only in the centrally important *Súrat al-tawḥíd* (Sura of the Divine Unity, Q. 112:2). The Arabic root S-M-D has the primary meaning "without hollow" or "without cleft," perhaps indicating, as Louis Gardet has recently argued, the divine impenetrability or unknowability.68 The same writer has translated the name of God *'aẓím* as "Inaccessible" (Q. 2:255; 42:4, etc.), indicating one "well beyond the bounds of human understanding, which cannot limit him in any way or compare him to anything."@ Qur'an 57:3 not only describes God as the "First and the Last" but also the "Manifest and the Hidden" (*ẓáhir wa'l-báṭin*). While the attribute *ẓáhir* implies the possibility of God's being "disclosed," "manifest," or "outward," *báin* indicates his being "Hidden," "Unmanifest," or "Inward."

It is sometimes reckoned that the supreme or Greatest Name of God (*al-ism al-a'ẓam*) is the "name of God's Essence (*al-Dhát*) as well as of all the Divine Names (*asmá'*) and Qualities (*ṣifát*) as related to and 'contained' in the Divine Nature."70 The many attributes of God (*ṣifát Alláh*) are fundamentally appellations and actions of the divinity. From early medieval times, attempts were made to systematize and classify them. The relationship of the various attributes and the essence was much debated. The most basic attribute was *wujúd* (Existence), which has been equated with the *dhát Alláh*, the Essence of God, and with *nafs Alláh* or the Self of God mentioned several times in the Qur'an (Q. 3:28; 6:54; 5:116; 20:41).

Some Muslim theologians, furthermore, have spoken of the "attributes of the Essence" *(ṣifát al-dhát)*, which indicate aspects of the divine transcendence *(e.g., qayyúm*, "Self-Subsisting") that are differentiated from other supplementary divine attributes, that is, various divine powers, providence, and immanence. Islamic theologians and philosophers disagreed as to whether the divine attributes are (1) the very Essence-the opinion of various Mu'tazilites and philosophers; (2) something different from the Essence, or (3) neither the Essence nor something different.[71] Shí'í Muslims have often made a sharp distinction between the attributes of the divine *dhát* (Essence) and the other divine attributes they generally understood figuratively. Worth quoting in this connection is Imám 'Ah's declaration: "Absolute unity (*kamál al-tawḥíd*) excludeth all attributes (*al-ṣifát*)."[72] The same was concluded from Arabic Neoplatonic sources.

In sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and the Twelver Imams contained in a multitude of Sunni and Shi'i sources, many statements underlining the exalted transcendence or unknowability of God are registered. A well-known prophetic tradition cited by al-Ghazali (d. 1111) in his *Mishkat al-anwár* (The Niche of Lights) and occasionally referred to by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, has it that: "Before God are 70 [,000] veils of Light and Darkness. Should they be unveiled, the Splendours of His Countenance (*subuḥát wajhihi*) would assuredly set ablaze all who discern Him with their vision."[73] In summing up aspects of Shí'í cosmology, it has been noted that "the essence of the Creator is separated from the creation by veils (*ḥejáb*), curtains (*setr*), and pavilions *(soradeq)* impregnated with the divine attributes."[74] The inaccessibility and unknowability of God are indirectly expressed in Islamic cosmology in a multitude of different ways.

Among the significant traditions of the Imams cited by Kulayni is his *Uṣul al-Káfí* is the following attributed to Abú Ja'far:

> Talk together about the creation of God (*khalq Alláh*) but do not talk about God Himself for direct discussion about God increases naught but the bewilderment of the one who indulges in it.

and also:

> Talk together about everything but never talk about the Essence of God (*dhát Alláh*).[75]

Neoplatonic influence was evident in Islamic sources from early times. A recension of the last three books of Plotinus's *Enneads,* with some commentary, was translated early on into Arabic and Syriac under the erroneous title "The Theology of Aristotle" *(Uthúlújiyá Arisṭáṭálís).* Widely known from the mid-ninth century, the Pseudo-Aristotelian "Theology" was commented upon by early Muslim philosophical theologians, including al-Kindí (d. c. 870) and al-Fárábí (d. 950). One of the Arabic Plotinus sources *Fí al-ilm al-iláhí* (On the Divine Science) has it that "whoever wishes to describe the Almighty Creator must remove from Him all attributes."[76] This is echoed in many Islamic and Bábí–Bahá'í sources.

In addition to the writings of Plotinus, certain works of Porphyry and Proclus were also available in Arabic "as a result of the Hellenistic scholars having taken refuge in Persian courts after Justinian closed the then Neoplatonic Platonic academy at Athens in 529."[77] As a religious philosophy, Neoplatonism was utilized by Avicenna (Ibn Sina d. 1037), Aver-roes, and other Islamic theologians and philosophers. It had a significant effect upon major Jewish, Christian, and Islamic medieval philosophers and theologians, many of whom underlined the unknowability of God.78

At one point in his *Mishkat al-anwár* (Niche of Lights), the great Muslim theologian Abú Hámid al-Gházálí (d. 1111) writes that ". . . none knows Allah with a real knowledge but He Himself; for every [thing] known falls necessarily under the sway and within the province of the Knower."[79] In his article "The Unknowability of God in al-Ghazali," Burrell writes: "So the upshot of God's unknowability for Ghazali, is to render speculative inquiry into God and the things of God effectively incompatible with the essential human task of responding wholeheartedly to the lure of the One."[80]

The aforementioned Ibn 'Arabí underlined the unknowability and unmanifest nature of the transcendent divine Essence: "The Divine Essence (*al-dhát al-iláhiyya*) cannot be understood by the rational faculty."[81] The divine Essence is transcendent above the cosmos, "independent of the worlds." (Q. 3:97)[82] The great Shaykh often cited the following prophetic tradition: "Reflect (*tafakkur*) upon all things, but reflect not upon Gods Essence."[83] Any attempt by human beings to fathom the divine Essence is futile, as implied in the quranic phrase: "God would have you beware of Himself (*nafsihi*)." (Q. 3:28/30)

Chittick sums up key aspects of Ibn 'Arabí's theology when he states: "God is known through the relations, attributions, and correlations that

become established between Him and the cosmos. But the Essence is unknown, since nothing is related to It." Ibn 'Arabí's explanation is:

> In respect of Itself the Essence has no name, since It is not the locus of effects, nor is It known by anyone. There is no name to denote It without relationship, nor with any assurance (*tamkín*). For names act to make known and to distinguish, but this door [to knowledge of the Essence] is forbidden to anyone other than God, since "None knows God but God." So the names exist through us and for us. They revolve around us and become manifest within us. Their properties are with us, their goals are toward us, their expressions are of us, and their beginnings are from us. . . . Reflection (*fikr*) has no governing property or domain in the Essence of the Real, neither rationally nor according to the Law. For the Law has forbidden reflection upon the Essence of God, a point to which is alluded by His words, "God warns you about His Self" (3:28). This is because there is no interrelationship (*munasaba*) between the Essence of the Real and the essence of the creatures.84

> In our view there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown. To It are ascribed descriptions that make It incomparable with the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*). It possesses eternity (al-*qidam*), and to Its Being is ascribed beginninglessness (*al-azal*). But all these names designate negations, such as the negation of beginning and everything as appropriate to temporal origination.85

According to Walker, nascent Ismá'ílí (Shí'í) philosophy was strongly influenced by Neoplatonic thought: ". . . leading members of the Ismá'ílí sect accepted . . . a considerable dose of neoplatonic theory as a reinforcement for a dogma whose central proposition was the unknowableness of God."[86] Neoplatonic cosmology and theology seems to have been introduced by the *dá'í* (summoner> al-Nasafi (d. Bukhárá 943), who was influenced by an Arabic recension of Plotinus' ***Enneads*** in the form of the Pseudo-Aristotelian "Theology."[87] His ideas were developed by Abú Ya'qúb al-Sijistani (fl. mid. tenth cent.?). For al-Sijistání, the ultimate Godhead is beyond "being" and attributes; the divine Identity (*inníyah*) is far beyond unknowability. Even the logic of apophatic theology is an inadequate indication of the nature of the Godhead. Negative theology is negated before the sublime mystery of the ultimately unknowable; the transcendent Godhead is beyond unknowing. Before the God Who transcends being and nonbeing is the double negation of the negated:

> There does not exist a *tanzíh* [transcendence] more brilliant and more splendid than that by which we establish the absolute transcendence of our Originator through the use of these phrases in which a negative and a negative of a negative apply to the thing denied.88

Many other Muslim writers, theologians, philosophers, and mystics have, in one way or another, followed a theological *uia negatiua* and supported the doctrine of the unknowability of God. Among them, Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (d. 1826) and Sayyid Kázim Rashti (d. 1844), the twin forerunners of the Báb. The former, at one point in his *Tafsír súrat al-tawhid* (Commentary on the Súra of the Divine Oneness, [i.e., Q. 112]), for example, gives this key quranic text an apophatically oriented exegesis when he writes:

> So God, praised be He, negates from His Attribute (*ifa*) the mode of multiplicity and number through His saying, "He God is One" (112:1). He negates alternation and diminution through His saying, "God is the All-Enduring" (*al-ṣamad;* 112:2). He negates causation and production (*'ilal wa ma'lúl*) through His saying, "He neither begetteth nor is begotton" (112:3). And He negates similarity and contrariety through His saying, "Not any one is comparable to Him" (112:4).89

## THE WRITINGS OF THE BÁB

There is hardly a major or minor work of the Báb (1819-1850) which does not contain a celebration of the divine transcendence. For the Prophet from Shiraz, the absolute divine Essence (*dhátu'l-dhát*) is "Wholly Other." Numerous exordiums to scores of the Báb's Arabic and Persian compositions contain verses in which the ultimate Godhead is declared beyond the ken of the human mind. So central was the Báb's view of the transcendence of God that he changed the *basmalah,* "In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate," to "In the Name of God, the Inaccessible (*al-amna'*), the Most Holy *(al-aqdas).*"90 The last two divine attributes of this classical Islamic invocation, present before all but one of the 114 súras of the Qur'an, are replaced with two non-quranic superlatives which indicate that in transcendent holiness the ultimate godhead is set apart.

From the *Qayyúmu'l-asmá'* (1844; suras 30, 32, 33, etc.) to the *Kitábu'l-asmá'* (Book of Names; late 1840s), the phrase: "There is naught like unto Him [God]" (Q. 42:11b) is frequently quoted in the

writings of the Báb. The central theological importance of apophatic theology is, for example, indicated in the Báb's *Sáhifay-i ʿadliyya* (Equitable Tract; early 1847?). In the third section of this seminal Persian work headed "On the knowledge of God *(maʿrifat Alláh)* and the knowledge of His saints," it is stated that the basis of religion is the knowledge of God *(maʿrifat Alláh)*, the perfection of which is the knowledge of the divine unity *(tawḥíd)*. This demands the negation of the divine names and attributes from the sactified divine essence *(dhát-i muqaddas)*, for the perfection of apophasis (negation) is the appearance of the Manifestation of God who is the locus of the divine Oneness *(aḥadiyya)* around whom the divine names and attributes revolve.

What follows are a few notes on selected writings of the Báb which are not wholly in strict chronological order and which contain testimonies to the incomprehensibility of God and related theological issues.

*Commentary on a Phrase Within the Dawn Prayer.* Among the minor though significant works of the Báb is his *Tafsír duʾa al-ṣabáḥ*, a commentary on a phrase within a dawn prayer ascribed to Imám ʿAlí (d. 661), the cousin, son-in-law, and successor of the Prophet Muhammad.[91] The phrase commented upon is from a supplication in which God is addressed as the One Who, "the proof of Thine Essence is furnished through Thine Essence *(dalla ʿalá dhátihi bi-dhátihi)*."[92] This phrase is cited quite frequently in Bábí–Bahá'í scripture. The transcendent divine essence is really only adequately testified to by its own self. Only God can comprehend God's "Essential Reality" *(dhátiyyat)* for the "bird" of the human "heart" has, for all eternity, been unable to "ascend" unto the domain of His mystery. Knowledge/*gnosis* of the eternal divine essence is impossible and inaccessible.93 The transcendence and unknowability of God is quite frequently underlined in this work of the Báb.

*Commentary on the Tradition of the (Divine3 Cloud (Ḥadíth al-ʾamáʾ).*[94] A hadith has it that the Prophet Muhammad was asked, "Where was our Lord before He created the creation?" He is said to have replied, "He [God] was in a Cloud (*ʿamáʾ*), above it [or Him] air *(hawkʾ)* and below it [or Him] air." This reply probably originally expressed the conviction that God was hidden and self-subsisting in his own Being. It indicates that before God's work of creation, God was in obscurity, enshrouded in the cloud of his own Being, wrapped in a dark mist.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were both significantly influenced by this tradition and its interpretation in theosophical Sufism—Bahá'u'lláh's earliest extant work is entitled *Rashḥ-i 'Amá'* ("The Sprinkling of the Divine Cloud," 1269/late 1852). The term *'amá'* (loosely, "cloud") is quite frequent in their writings. In Bábí–Bahá'í scripture, as in Sufi interpretations, it is sometimes indicative of the hidden and unknowable Essence of God.

In one of his early epistles, the Báb comments in some detail on the "tradition of 'amá' ":[95] "God was in *'amá'* (a "cloud") above it air and below it air." He states that this tradition indicates God's isolated independence. The term *al-'amá'* ("the Cloud") only inadequately indicates the divine *dhát* ("essence").[96] In his interpretation, the Báb seems to underline God's absolute otherness to such an extent that the term *'amá'* only indirectly hints at His transcendent unknowability. God's *nafs* ("Self') and *dhát* ("Essence") are probably thought to be created and hypostatic realities indicative of, yet ontologically distinguishable from, God's uncreated and absolute Ipseity. For the Báb, *'amá'* indicates God's absolute otherness. It is derived from *al-'amí* or *al-'amán* ("blindness," "unknowing"), for vision is blinded before God's Face and eyes are incapable of beholding God's Countenance.

For the Báb, the Ḥadíth of 'Amá' also enshrines the mysteries surrounding the Sinaitic theophany (Q. 7:143). It was not the eternal unknowable Essence of God (*dhátu'l-azal*) that appeared in the celestial realm of *'amá'* (*malakútu'l-'amá'*) and radiated forth through the divine light on Mount Sinai but an *umr* (lit. "command"; "Logos") which God created from nothing. The theophany on the Mount was not the manifestation of *'amá'* as God's absolute essence-not a monistic type "theophany or the Divine Essence" *(tajallí al-dhát)*—but the disclosure of the divine Light *(núr)* unto, through, and in God's Self *(nafs),* the Manifestation of God. The Báb clarifies his interpretation of the modes of the divine theophany including the "theophany of the Divine Essence" *(tajallí al-dhát)* found in certain Sufi treatises.[97] Such a theophany does not involve a manifestation of the divine Essence understood as a "cloud" or anything else.

*Letter to Mírzá Ḥasan Waqáyí'-nigár.* In a letter addressed to Mírzá Ḥasan Waqáyí'-nigár, the Báb comments upon various quranic texts including the quranic phrase, "We [God; the Divine] are nearer to him [the human being] than his jugular vein (*habl al-waríd*)."[98] At the very beginning of his commentary, the Báb underlines the utter

Singleness, Isolatedness, Transcendence, and Unknowability of the divine Essence (*al-dhát*). God has eternally "detached" the divine "Names and Attributes" from referring to the "court" of God's transcendent "Presence" (*hadratihi*). They apply primarily to God's "Will" (*al-mashiyyat*). Nearness to the divine essence is impossible except by virtue of the theophany (*tajallí*) of God's "Self' (*nafs*), the locus of God's "Will," and of the Messenger or Manifestation of God. Qur'an 50:16b alludes to the "sign of God" (*áyat Alláh*) which is found within the inmost human reality, which is, symbolically speaking, the depths of the human "heart" (*fú'ád*).[99]

*Commentary on the Night of Power (Tafsír Laylatu'l-Qadr).* Probably dating from the time of the Báb's imprisonment in Ádhirbayján (1848–49), the "Commentary on the Night of Power" is a succinct commentary on a phrase in sura *97* (*Súratu'l-qadr*) of the Qur'an. The sublimity of God's *dhátiyyat* (Essential Reality) is early on declared transcendent above "all things" (*kull shuy'*). The Báb indicated that no praise is more lofty than praise of God and no eulogium more splendid (*abhá*) than that of the divine Being. Human beings only inadequately testify to the "Divinity" (*uluhiyya*) and "Lordship" *(rububiyyu)* of the transcendent God Who is beyond human comprehension.100

*A Verse of the Sermon of the Gulf (Khuṭba al-ṭutunjiyya).*[101] The direct vision of the absolute divine Essence is not regarded as possible in either Bábí or Bahá'í scripture. In a sermon ascribed to Imam 'Ah known as the (loosely) "Sermon of the Gulf," the Imám at one point declares, "I saw God (*ráytú'lláh*) and Paradise through the vision of the *eye* (*ráyu'l-'ayn*)." Taken literally, this statement is highly controversial.[102] In his epistle known as *al-Lawámi' al-badí'* (The Wondrous Brilliances, 1846/7), the Báb interpreted it to refer to Imám 'Alí's inner "vision of the Primal Will of *God"* (*rú'yatu'l-mashiyya*) and not a direct vision of the transcendent Deity.103 In the previously referred to commentary on the *Du'a al-sabáḥ* (Dawn Prayer), the same passage from the *Khuṭba al-ṭutunjiyya* is quoted and interpreted in terms of the "vision of the Divine Theophany" (*rú'yat al-tajallí*), understood as a divine Manifestation not a disclosure of the divine Essence.[104]

*Persian and Arabic Bayáns (Expositions).* Both the Persian and Arabic *Bayáns* (Expositions) of the Báb contain clear statements about the transcendence and incomprehensibility of the Godhead.

Some key theological issues are set down in the first two *bábs* (gates) of the fourth *Wáḥid* (Unity) of the Persian ***Buy&z.*** The Persian *Bayán* IV:2 discusses the two stations (*maqámayn*) of the *Nuqṭa* (Point) or "Sun of Truth" (*shams-i ḥaqíqat*; Manifestation of God). The first station is that of his being the divine Manifestation (*maẓhar-i iláhiyya*), representative of the ***ghuyb-i*** *dhát* (Unseen Essence). As the voice of the ***ghayb-i*** *dhát*, the Báb articulates a divinely revealed negative theology:

> . . . He is One Indescribable by any description; One Who cannot be characterized by any depiction. Supremely Transcendent (*muta'álí*) is He above any mention or praise-sanctified beyond both pristine whiteness (*káfúr;* lit., camphor) and the acme of actualization (*jawhar imḍá'í*). It is impossible that He be comprehended by anyone other than Himself or for anyone other than He Himself to be united with Him. His is the creation and the Command. No God is there except Him, the One, the All-Powerful, the Transcendent.105

The second *báb* of the fourth *Wáḥid* makes it clear that, God being unknowable, the "Point" (*nuqṭa*; Manifestation of God) as the center of the divine Will ***(mashiyya)*** is the locus of all theological statements. The Báb maintains that the "essence of this section (*báb*)" is that the eternal divine Essence (*dhát-i azal*) has ever been and will ever remain incomprehensible, indescribable, and beyond characterization and human vision.[106]

***The Seven Proofs*** *(Dalá'il-i Sab'ih).* Addressed perhaps to a Shaykhi (and Bábí?), the Persian *Dalá'il-i* ***sub'ih*** opens with a testimony to God's uniqueness, eternality, and unknowability. In the light of his claim to be the Qá'im, a shift in the Báb's eschatological views can be seen in the *Dalá'il-i* ***sub'ih.*** His earlier futurist though imminent eschatological perspective begins to be transformed into a partly realized or inaugurated eschatological stance. Traditional apocalyptic and other expected latter-day "signs" central to Shí'í messianism are given, in the light of their proposed fulfilment, non-literal interpretations.[107] The eschatological "meeting with ***God"*** (*liqá'u'lláh; see* Qur'an 13:2, etc.) is not a literal coming into the presence of the eternal divine essence (*dhát-i-azal*), but the meeting with the divine manifestation of God (*maẓhar-i ḥaqíqat*), with, in fact, the Báb on the mount of Mákú or wherever he resides.108

Apart from underlining the transcendence and unknowability of the essence of God, the Báb also emphasized the presence of the "Day of God" through his manifestation. He frequently claimed (secondary) divinity and also bestowed it upon others. There exist writings of the Báb cited by Bahá'u'lláh in his *Lawḥ-i sarráj* (c. 1867) which make it clear that a pleroma of Bábis shared in his eschatological divinity (*al-ulúhiyya*) and Lordship (*al-rubúbiyya*). He stated that God conferred "divinity" and "Lordship" upon whomsoever he pleased.[109] He never compromised, however, the absolute otherness and transcendent unknowability of the divine Essence.

## THE BAHÁ'Í SCRIPTURE

As with Bábí scripture, the Bahá'í texts are strictly monotheistic, or rather supra-monotheistic in the sense that the essence of God lies far beyond any notion of numerical oneness, let alone multiplicity.[110] The doctrine of *tuwhid* (the divine Oneness) is uncompromisingly upheld. There is no place for anthropomorphism, anthropopathism,[111] pantheism, or any vision of or *unio mysticu* with the unknowable godhead. Bahá'u'lláh understood *tuwhid* (the Oneness of God) in a variety of ways. Its primary significance is the complete transcendence of God:

> Regard thou the one true God (*haqq*) as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things. The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine Unity (*tawhíd*).[112]

*Tablet of All Food (Lawḥ-i kullu't-ṭa'ám).* Bahá'u'lláh's early "Tablet of All Food" (c. 1854) is basically a mystical commentary upon Qur'an 3:87, which, as he explains, has "subtle meanings infinite in their infinitude." Towards the beginning of this tablet the mystical significance of food *(ṭa'ám)* is related to the hierarchy of metaphysical realms well known in theosophical Sufism and mentioned below. Following Islamic mystical cosmology, Bahá'u'lláh mentions the *'arshu'l-háhút* ("the Throne of He-ness/Ipseity") related to the "Paradise of the divine oneness" (*jannatu'l-aḥadiyya*). None, not even Bahá'u'lláh himself, can expound the mysteries of even a letter of the unfathomable mysteries of Qur'an 3:87 relative to this sphere. The sphere of the unknowable Essence is "Wholly Other."

*The Seven Valleys (Haft vádí).* In the fourth of the Seven Valleys (c. 1857–58), the "Valley of Unity" *(vádí-i tawḥíd),* Bahá'u'lláh counters an anthropomorphic understanding of the experience of the divine and underlines the divine transcendence and unknowability:

> . . . let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism (*ḥulúl*), nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures. . . . For God is, in His Essence (*bi-dhátihi muqaddas*), holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures (*ṣifát-i khalq*), and ever will remain so. No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower (*'urufá*) hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge (*vádí ma'rifatish*) of Him; every saint (*awliwá*) hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence (*dhátish*). Sanctified is He above the understanding (*'irfán*) of the wise (*'árif*); exalted is He above the knowledge of the knowing! The way is barred and to seek it is impiety; His proof is His signs; His being is His evidence.
>
> Wherefore, the lovers of the face of the Beloved have said [words of Imám 'Ah]: "0 Thou, the One Whose Essence alone showeth the way to His Essence (*dalla 'alá dháthihi bi-dhátihi*), and Who is sanctified above any likeness to His creatures." How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun? The Friend hath said, "But for Thee, we had not known Thee," and the Beloved hath said, "nor attained Thy presence."[113]

*The Hidden Words (Kalimát-i makntinih).* The sixty-sixth Arabic Hidden Word (c. 1858) is addressed, in language reminiscent of that of al-Jílí, to the "children of the Divine and Invisible Essence" (*al-huwiyya al-ghayb).* Humanity is reminded of the incomprehensibility and inaccessibilitiy of the ultimate divinity.

> Ye shall be hindered from loving Me and souls shall be perturbed as they make mention of Me. For minds (*al-'aql*) cannot grasp Me not hearts (*al-qulúb*) contain Me.114

*Commentary on the "He is" (Tafsír-i Hú [Huwa]).*[115] Bahá'u'lláh wrote a highly theosophical "Commentary on the phrase 'He is' " (c. 1859), which was evidently written soon after "The Hidden Words" *(Kalimat-i makntinih* c. 1858), one of which (Arabic No. 3) is cited and interpreted.[116] It contains many noteworthy theological statements about the divine Identity (*huwa,* "He-ness"), "Essence" (*dhát*), Names

(*asmá'*), and Attributes (*ṣifát*). It was written mainly to explain a passage from a writing of the Báb (or other) and addressed to a "Mirror" (*mirát)* of the Bábí dispensation, probably Mírzá Yahyá.[117] The issue of the relationship of the "Mirror," the divine Names and Attributes, the "Most Beautiful Names" *(al-asmá' al-ḥusná'),* and the divine Identity (Arabic: *huwa=* "He is," Persian: *Hú)* is central to the commentary.

Bahá'u'lláh presents the Manifestation of God as the locus of the Names and Attributes of God and the vehicle through which the unknowable Essence, which is beyond the "Most Beautiful Names" (*al-asmá' al-ḥusná'*), communicates with creation. While the totality of the divine "Names" (*al-asmá'*) revolve around the "Divine Will" (*mashiyya*), all the divine "Attributes" (*al-ṣifát*) are realized through God's "Intention" (*irada*). Everything circumambulates the divine and unfathomable Essence (*dhát*) whose theophany (manifestation; *tajallí)* is realized through the major prophets or Manifestations. The Báb is referred to as the "Fountainhead of His Essence" *(manba' al-dhátihi*) and the "Locus of His Activity" (Source of His Action; *maṣdar fi'ihi*).

The divinely revealed verse commented upon indicates that all the divine Names *(al-asmá')* are concentrated in the expression "all things" (*kullu shay'*), which were subsequently compacted or limited within the divine name "He is" (*huwa*). In Arabic, *huwa* is composed of the two letters "H" (*há'*) and "W" (*wáw*), which are indicative of its "inner" and "outer" dimensions respectively. The inner dimension of the divine Identity is expressed in the phrases: "hiddenness of the Ipseity" (*ghayb al-huwiyya*), "interiority of the divine Oneness" (*sirr al-ahadiyya*), and the "primordial, pristine divine Essence" (*al-dhát al-bahta al-qadima).* When the hidden "H" is established upon the "enthroned, eternal Temple" (*al-haykal al-'arshiyya al-azaliyya*), "the beauty of the divine Ipseity" (*jamálu'l-huwiyya*) is established in the "Luminous Temple" (*haykalu'l-núriyya*) of the Manifestation of God. God made his name "He is" (*huwa*) the greatest of the divine designations, for it is a "Mirror" (*mirát*) of all the divine Names (*al-asmá'*) and Attributes (*al-ṣifát*).

Unlike the divine Names and Attributes whose manifestation accounts for all earthly and heavenly things, the reality of the divine Essence is not in its *very* Self (*al-dhát bi'l-dhátihi*) manifested unto a single thing. Neither is it grasped or comprehended by anything. It is guarded from the comprehension of God's creatures and immeasurably beyond the *gnosis* of God's servants. Experiential knowledge of the divine Essence (*ma'rifat dhátihi*) is impossible.

'Abdu'l-Baha' wrote a number of important tablets in explanation of *huwa Alláh* (He is God), an expression that is not only found several times in the Qur'an (e.g., Q. 28:70) but also is widely used in Islam. As in the *Tafsír-i Hú*, his explanation focuses on the doctrine of the unknowability of God. One tablet written in reply to the question why the epithet "He is God" is frequently written at the beginning of Baha'i scriptural tablets (*alwáḥ*) begins by acknowledging its use in the Orient and its customary prefixing to Bábí and Baha'i tablets. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that it indicates the incomprehensibility of the one, divine Essence (*ḥaqíqat-i-dhát-i-aḥadiyyat),* which is beyond conceptualization. It further indicates the "Beauty of the Promised One" Who is the "Sun of Reality" as the manifest Divinity (i.e., Bahá'u'lláh) in allusion to whose name 'Abdu'l-Baha commences his writings.[118]

Another tablet by 'Abdu'l-Baha to a Western Baha'i reads:

> 0 Thou who art firm in the Covenant!
>
> Thou hast asked regarding the phrase "He is God!" written above the Tablets. By this Word it is intended that no one hath any access to the Invisible Essence. The way is barred and the road impassable. In this world all men must turn their faces toward "Him-whom-God-shall-Manifest." He is the "Dawning-place of Divinity" and the "Manifestation of Deity." He is the "Ultimate Goal," and the "Adored One" of all and the 'Worshipped One" of all. Otherwise, whatever flashes through the mind is not that Essence of essences and the Reality of realities; nay, rather, is it pure imagination woven by man and is surrounded, not the surrounding. Consequently, it returns finally to the realm of suppositions and conjectures.[119]

"He is" *(huwa)* signifies that human beings must turn indirectly to God through the Manifestation. The ultimate deity, the Essence of essences, cannot become an object of direct identification.

*Tablet* ***of*** *the City* ***of*** *the Divine Oneness (Lawḥ-i madínatu'l-tawḥíd).* This centrally important tablet (c. 1858) is one of the cornerstones of any systematic Bahá'í theology. It begins with Bahá'u'lláh's categorical and repeated assertion of the transcendent incomprehensibility of God:

> Praise be to God, the All-Possessing, the Ring of incomparable glory, a praise which is immeasurably above the understanding of all created things, and is exalted beyond the grasp of the minds of men. None else besides Him hath ever been able to sing adequately His praise, nor will any man succeed at any time in describing the full measure of His glory.

> Who is it that can claim to have attained the heights of His exalted Essence, and what mind can measure the depths of His unfathomable mystery? . . .
>
> . . So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations. Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, "Thou shalt never behold Me!"; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, "Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!" From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlastingly continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence. Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure.120

This key tablet further clarifies that the doctrine of *tawḥíd* (the Divine Oneness) is no mere abstract theological proposition. Its affirmation involves regarding God and the Manifestation of God as "One and the same" in purpose, but not in essence. Trinitarian consubstantiability is frequently rejected in Bábí and Bahá'í scripture. In its Bahá'í interpretation, *tawḥíd* enshrines the central Bahá'í teaching of the oneness of the Manifestations of God.

***The Essence of the Mysteries*** *(Jawáhiru'l-asrár).* Written in response to a number of written questions about the expected Muslim messiah (the Mahdi) posed by Sayyid Yúsuf-i Sidihi Isfáhání, about a year before the composition of the Kitáb-i Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh's *Jawáhiru'l-Asrár* (c. 1860-61) also touches on the question of the transcendent unknowability of God. This work is closely related to the earlier Seven Valleys *(Haft vádí,* c. 1858) and contains a discussion of the "stations *(maqámát)* of the spiritual path *(as-sulúk)*." In the fourth stage, the "City of the Divine Unity" *(madínatu'l-tawḥíd)*, Bahá'u'lláh explains that God was never manifested in his own Being *(kaynúniyya)* or essential Reality *(dhátiyya)* since God was "eternally hidden in the

ancient Eternity of His Essence." This, until God decided to send Messengers to manifest his Beauty in the "Kingdom of Names."[121]

*The Book of Certitude (Kitáb-i Íqán).* Key theological passages in the Kitab-i Íqán (1862) clearly maintain that "the door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days" (*dhát-i-azal*; the ultimate godhead) is "closed in the face of all beings."[122]

> To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence (*ghayb-i huwiyya*), the divine Being (*dhát-i ahadiyya-i muqaddas),* is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. 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 [Q. 6: 1031 ."[123]

*As* in the Báb's *Dalá'il-i sab'ih* (Seven Proofs), the Kitab-i Íqán interprets the eschatological *liqá'u'lláh* (meeting with God) non-literally. In the light of the transcendence of the divine Essence, it cannot be other than meeting the Manifestation of God in faith.124

The passages reviewed above, which are largely from early titled tablets, all have apophatic theological dimensions and date from the first decade of Baha'u'llah's ministry (1853-63). Numerous other relevant texts from these early years as well as the subsequent three decades cannot be discussed in detail here. We now turn to a brief exposition of the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi.

## THE WRITINGS OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

In addition to the commentaries referred to above, numerous theological expositions were written by Baha'u'llah's eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921). When asked to what extent the human being can comprehend God, 'Abdu'l-Baha explained that there are two kinds of knowledge: (1) "knowledge of the essence of a thing (*ma'rifat-i dhdt-i shay'*)" and (2) "the knowledge of its qualities [or attributes] (*ma'rifat-i ṣifát-i shuy '*)."[125] The knowledge of the inner essence of anything is

impossible, although it can be known by its attributes. God can only be known indirectly through the divine attributes focused on the Manifestation of God: "It is certain that the Divine Reality (*ḥaqíqat-i rubúbiyyat*) is unknown with regard to its essence (*dhát*) and is known with regard to its attributes (*ṣifát*)."[126]

In a tablet to the Swiss entomologist Dr. Auguste Fore1 (d. 19311, 'Abdu'l-Baha reiterated the theological principle that God is beyond known attributes. The following excerpt has a definite apophatic theological dimension:

> As to the attributes (*ṣifát*) and perfections (*kamálát*) such as will ("intention" *irádih),* knowledge and power and other ancient attributes that we ascribe to that Divine Reality (*ḥaqíqat-i láhútiyyih*), these are the signs that reflect the existence of beings in the visible plane and not the Absolute Perfection of the Divine Essence *(haqiqat-i ulúhiyya*) that cannot be comprehended. . . . Thus we say His attributes are unknowable. . . . The purpose is to show that these attributes and perfections that we recount for that Universal Reality (*ḥaqíqat-i kulliyya*) are only in order to deny [or negate] imperfections (*salb-i naqá'is*), rather than to assert [or affirm] perfections *(thubut-i kamálát*) that the human mind can conceive. Thus we say His attributes are unknowable.[127]

For 'Abdu'l-Baha, the divine names and attributes are not posited to prove the divine perfections but rather in order to disprove imperfections.[128] The names and attributes of God revolve around and are perfectly mirrored in the Messenger or Manifestation of God:

> . . . all that the human reality knows, discovers and understands of the names (*asma'*), the attributes (*ṣifát*) and the perfections (*kamálát*) of God refer to these Holy Manifestations [of God] (*maẓáhir-i muqudassih).* There is no access to anything else: "the way is barred and seeking forbidden . . . for the essential names and attributes of God (*asmá' va ṣifát-i dhátiyya-i iláhiyya*) are identical with His Essence (*'ayn-i dhát*), and His Essence is above all comprehension. . . . Accordingly all these names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation; and all that we imagine and suppose besides them is mere imagination, for we have no means of comprehending that which is invisible and inaccessible.129

It should also be noted that 'Abdu'l-Baha, indirectly clarifying an aspect of Bahá'í cosmology when explaining the significance of the Greatest Name *(al-ism al-a'ẓam*, i.e., Bahá'), spoke of three "worlds": (1) the inaccessible world of the True One (Divine Essence, *Warn-i*

*ḥaqq)*, which is the source of emanated reality; (2) the "world of the Divine Command" or sphere of the Manifestation(s) of God (*'álam-i amr*), in which the divine attributes are mirrored; and (3) the world(s) of creation *('dam-i khalq)*.[130]

## SHOGHI EFFENDI

Shoghi Effendi (c. 1896–1957), the great-grandson of Baha'u'llah and head of the Baha'i religion for thirty-six years, authored thousands of authoritative expositions of Baha'i doctrine. In his compilation of selected English-language translations from tablets of the Founder of the Baha'i Faith entitled *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (1st ed. 1935), he opened this volume with a lengthy supplication addressed to a certain Áqá Muhammad Ḥasan that expressed God's immeasurable exaltation above human attempts to "unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory or even hint at the nature of Thine Essence."[131]

Among the most important works of Shoghi Effendi is *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (1937). Therein, the authoritative Bahá'í view of the station of the central figures of the Baha'i Faith is lucidly set out. Anthropomorphism, incarnationalism, and pantheism are rejected in the light of the divine transcendence and unknowability. Though a divine being and a complete "incarnation of the Names and Attributes of God," Baha'u'llah should ever remain entirely distinguished from the ultimate Godhead-that "invisible yet rational God Who, however much we extol the divinity of His Manifestations on earth, can in no wise incarnate His infinite, His unknowable, His incorruptible and all-embracing Reality in the concrete and limited frame of a mortal being."[132]

Clarifying a fundamental aspect of Baha'i theology, Shoghi Effendi also states in this work that Bahá'u'lláh should be regarded as no more than a Manifestation of God, "never to be identified with that invisible Reality, the Essence of Divinity itself." This, he remarks, is "one of the major beliefs of our Faith,"[133] which should neither be obscured nor compromised.

Shoghi Effendi's interpretation of the doctrine of the unknowability of God is indirectly expressed in a letter written through his secretary in 1929. Therein, Shoghi Effendi cites 'Abdu'l-Bahá as having made a distinction between the standpoint of "gnostics" and "religionists":

> 'Abdu'l-Baha says that the main difference between the gnostics and the religionists is that the gnostics maintain the existence of only two worlds, the world of God and the world of the creature. The prophets however, maintained the existence of three worlds [1] the world of God, [2] the world of the Will or the Word, and [3] the world of created things. The prophets, therefore, maintained that a knowledge of God is impossible. As 'Abdu'l-Baha says man can never know God or even imagine Him. If he does that object is not God but an imaginary idol.134

Shoghi Effendi did not, however, maintain that Baha'i negative theology should rule out a personal relationship with God through the Manifestation or messenger. In a tablet to a Western Baha'i, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded to the assertion of the "Impersonality of Divinity" by stating that the "Personality is in the Manifestation of the Divinity, not in the Essence of Divinity."[135] Bahá'í scripture does not speak of the so-called "Persons" (*aqnúm*) of the ultimate divinity. No exact theology of the "personality" of the ultimate Godhead exists in Baha'i sacred scripture, although the doctrine of the human "individual reality" (*ḥaqíqat-i shákhiṣih*) and the "distinct personality" (*shakhṣiyyat-i makhṣúṣih*) of the Manifestation of God, defined as the "rational soul" (*nafs-i náṭiqih*), is definitely taught.136

In 1939, Shoghi Effendi wrote a letter explaining that the Bahá'í notion of a "personal God" rules out God being considered "an unconscious and determined force operating in the universe," as some scientists and materialists suppose. The "personal God," he explained, is not an anthropomorphic deity but a Godhead "beyond human comprehension," which, having a "Mind," "Will," and "Purpose," is "conscious of His creation."[137] The supreme Being is beyond names and attributes and is "Wholly Other." This being is "suprapersonal" in terms of its essence though not absolutely abstracted from creation, for which God has conceived a purpose. God is, quite definitely "personal" by virtue of the divinity and humanity of the Messenger through whom the divine providence is operative. A personal relationship with God through the Manifestation may be intimate, loving, and heartfelt. Humanity may achieve the depths of nearness to God and something of the infinite knowledge of God through the mediating Messenger and the study and experience of his sacred writings.

The foregoing sketch of the numerous Bábí and Baha'i testimonies to the incomprehensibility of God is not intended to leave a mere theological vacuum. A key point to be noted is that the

apophatically oriented Baha'i doctrine of the incomprehensibility of the godhead does not totally depersonalize the relationship between God and humankind. By virtue of the Messenger or Manifestation of God, a cataphatic (affirmative) theology makes God intimately personal. Human proximity to the supreme Being is an eternal spiritual possibility.[138] In Baha'i scripture, there is a fundamental emphasis upon the cataphatic or affirmative theology of the Manifestation of God. The Bahá'í apophatic or negative theology does not eclipse the all-important cataphatic theology of the Messenger or Manifestation of God.

## CONCLUSION

This article is but a partial register of the numerous religious and philosophical testimonies to the unknowability and incomprehensibility of God. From at least the beginning of the common era, apophatic theological/philosophical statements become increasingly numerous within the Abrahamic and non-Semitic-Asian religions. Such statements have come to have a major place within Bábí–Bahá'í scripture. Analysis of the implications of apophatic theological statements can be, moreover, spiritually and intellectually rewarding.

One can adore and worship God in and for his transcendence. Apophasis, as humble unknowing, might be experienced by one who becomes conscious of the sublime mystery of God and the Manifestation of God. It might be said to involve sensible bewilderment before the divine Beloved: "To merit the madness of love man must abound in sanity."[139] Ideally, to approach the All-Knowing, the aspirant must be full of that humble self-negation that is the ecstasy of unknowing. Consciousness of God's sublime and lofty unknowability is not the realization of an obscure vacuity-a theological "black hole"-but a cause of mystic religious exhilaration: "0 Lord, Increase my astonishment *(taḥayyir)* at Thee!"[140]

Bahá'ís can supplicate God and experience the profound mysteriousness of the Ultimate Divinity. They can experience the tremendous mystery of the divine Manifestation who also has unknowable dimensions; who is a "Beauty" veiled in oceans of Light: "His beauty hath no veiling save light, His face no covering save revelation."[141] Awe before the unfathomable, the ultimate divinity in a state of humble "unknowing" can be a profound mystical experience. It is not born

out of ignorance or anti-intellectualism, but rather out of a loving openness to the sublime. A realization of the namelessness, genderlessness, awe-inspiring "Wholly Other" may be a source of religious exhilaration and unity. God is unknowable but not at all remote. God's knowability is centered around the Manifestation who is the locus of the divine Names and Attributes. Nearness to the Messenger is nearness to God. Knowledge of God's revelation is the knowledge of God.

The doctrine of the unknowability of the Transcendent is one of the teachings the major world religions have in common. The consciousness that God is "Wholly Other" could be regarded as an important pathway within interreligious dialogue. In his comparative study ***Knowing the Unknowable God,*** Burrell argues that the received doctrine of God in the West was "an intercultural, interfaith achievement."[142] The Muslim Avicenna influenced the Jew Maimonides, and both influenced the Christian, Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps a fresh appreciation of this mutual theological common ground would inspire a greater sense of religious unity amongst contemporary seekers of the Transcendent.

Michael Sells begins his article "Apophasis in Plotinus" by asking "Is apophasis dead? Can there be a contemporary apophatic theology, or critical method, or approach to comparative religion and interreligious dialogue? If such approaches are possible, then a resource of virtually unfathomable richness lies largely untapped. I suggest that apophasis has much to offer contemporary thought and that, in turn, classical apophasis can be critically reevaluated from the perspective of contemporary concerns."[143] Bahá'í philosophers and theologians might be well advised to take up Sells' focus on apophasis as a path to inter-religious dialogue and unity.

This essay has done no more than selectively map out something of our rich apophatic theological heritage. It remains for Bahá'ís and other theologians to fulfil this task more adequately and contribute to a global apophatic theology in which the unknowable is loved and appreciated for his transcendent Mystery as well as for the Person of the Messenger or Manifestation of God.

## NOTES

1. See V. Kesich, "Via Negativa," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 15, ed. by M. Eliade, et al. (New York Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) pp. 253f.

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitub-i Iqán* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1980) p. *74; Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude,* trans. by Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1961) p. 64.

3. The terms *upophatic* (negative) and *cataphatic* (positive) to indicate a theology seem to have been first used in the Christian world by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (f.c. 500 CE).

4. H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (London: SPCK, 1966) p. 39.

5. See, for example, the trisagion, Isaiah 6:3.

6. Geza Vermes, trans. *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (N.c.: Pelican Books, n.d.) p. 70.

*7. The Via-Negatiuu in Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: Judaica Press, 1967) p. 38.

8. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, From Pluto to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) p. 19.

9. Mut. II:7, 10.

10. Opif. 71; Abr. 74-6.

11. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) pp. 47-48.

12. Baya ibn Pakuda, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart,* trans. from Arabic by Menahem Mansoor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) p. 143; cf. Jacobs, *Jewish Theology,* p. 39f.

13. Guide LVIII, Moses Maimonides,The *Guide for the Perplexed,* trans. by Friedhinder (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) p. 83.

14. G. Scholem, "God" (In Kabbalah) in *Encyclopedia Judaica.* Vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Keter Pub. House, 1972) p. 661.

15. According to Acts 17:23, Paul referred to an altar with the inscription "To an unknown *God*" (*agnóstó theó*) though it is unlikely, as has been argued, that this is a reference to the unknown God spoken about in gnostic texts (E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* [Leipzig, 19131; cf. T. Rajak, "The Unknown God" in *Journal of Jewish Studies,* Vol. 29 [1978] pp. 20-29).

16. D. W. Palmer, "Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century" in *Vigiliue Christianue,* Vol. 37 (1983) p. 224; see R. M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (London: SPCK, 1988).

17. Jean Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture: A History of Christian Doctrine before the Council of Niceu,* Vol. II (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) p. 323f; cf. the Christian apologists uses of "invisible," "impalpable," "impassible," "uncontainable."

18. E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocryphu,* ed. by W. Schneemelcher. Vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1965) p. 99; cf. *Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 6, p. 19.

19. J. Zandee Zandee, "Gnostic Ideas of the Fall and Salvation" in *Numen,* Vol. 11 (1964) p. 21.

20. See J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984) p. 99ff.

21. G. Quispel, "The Jung Codex and its Significance" in *The Jung Codex: A Newly Recovered Gnostic Papyrus,* ed. by F. M. Cross (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1955) p. 57.

*22. Apologia* 11.5, cited in H. Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 63.

23. Dial. 128.

24. Suppl. 10.1, cited in G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952) p. 3.

25. *Ad. Aut.* 1.3; cited in Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought.*

26. Adv. Haer. IV.20.6, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers,* p. 75.

27. Strom V 11:74.4, cited in Danielou, *Gospel Message,* p. 326.

28. Clement, Strom V.12.82, etc.

29. De Prin. 1.1.5.

30. Ibid., IV.4.8; I.1.5f.

31. Mary T. Clark, "Plotinus" in *Encyclopedia of Religion.* Vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) p. 368.

32. P. E. Walker, "An Ismá'ílí Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic *God"* in *American Journal of Semitic Studies,* Vol. 2 (1974) p. 9.

*33. Ennead* V. 3.13; 5.6, etc.

34. Plotinus' work, directly or indirectly through such of his followers as the anti-Christian Porphyry (232–305) Iambilicus (c. 245-326) and Proclus (c. 412-485) influenced many Church Fathers as well as emergent Islamic philosophy. (See R. Baine Harris, "A Brief Description of Neoplatonism" in *The Significance of Neoplatonism,* ed. by R. Baine Harris. International Society for Neoplatonic Studies [Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University, 1976] p. 1ff).

35. R. P. C. Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church" in Ackroyd, P. R., & C. F. Evans. *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. 448.

36. Comm. on the Song XI:1000; cited in Louth, *Christian Mystical Tradition,* p. 83.

*37.* Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses,* trans. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) pp. 94–95.

38. H. J. M. Turner, "The Mysterious Within Christianity" in *Eastern Churches Review,* Vol. 3 (Spring, 1971) p. 302.

39. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational,* trans. by J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press) App.1; F. Graffin & A. M. Malingren, "La Tradition syriaque des homélies de Jean Chrysostom sur

l'incomprehensibilite de Dieu" in *Epektasis,* ed. by C. C. Kassinengiesser (Paris, 1972) pp. 603-09.

40. Chrysostom, trans. Otto, Idea of *the Holy,* p. 184.

41. Enarr. 2 in Ps 26:8; MPL xxxvi, col. 203, cited in Turner, "The Mysterious Within Christianity," p. 301.

42. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Eng. tr. *of Essai sur la Théologie)* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co., 1957) p. 24.

43. These terms were earlier used by Proclus (412– c. 487 CE) in a quasi-theological context. Harry A. Wolfson opens his 1957 paper as follows, "By the time the Fathers of the Church began to offer negation as a solution to the problem of divine attributes, the theory of negative attributes had already been dealt with by Philo, Albinus and Plotinus." ("Negative Attributes in the Church Fathers and the Gnostic Basilides" in *Harvard Theological Review,* Vol. 50 119571 p. 145)

44. See Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989) p. 87.

45. Louth, ibid.

46. DN VII.3: 872A–B.

47. Cited in P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 184.

48. PG. xciv, 797b, cited in T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1964) p. 217.

49. Ia.7; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ.* Vol. 1, trans. by Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964) p. 25.

*50. De Veritate,* cited in F. C. Happold, *Prayer and Meditation* (London: Pelican Books, 1971) p. 31.

51. III:33 trans. James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing (New* York: Paulist Press, 1981) p. 120

52. Cited Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) p. 31. See further, J. Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1953); B. A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion,* vol. 53 (1973) pp. 263-92.

53. R. G. Williams, "The Via Negativa and the Foundations of Theology: An Introduction to the Thought of V. *N.* Lossky" in *New Studies in Theology 1,* ed. by Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1980) p. 96; Lossky, *Mystical Theology.*

54. II $27 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976 [1957]) pp. 179-254.

55. Barth, ibid., p. 185.

*56. Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 15, p. 55.

*57. Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 6, p. 29.

58. Cited in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *"God"* in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) p. 314.

59. Cf. A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976) p. 270.

60. Arabic *huwiyya* is an abstract word that was originally "coined in order to express in Arabic the nuances of Greek philosophy." (A. M. Goichon, "Huwiyya" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam.* Vol. 3 [Leiden, 19601 p. 644) It occurs in the so-called "Theology of Aristotle," Ibn Siná, and in numerous later mystical writers.

61. In his *Meccan Revelations (al-Futúḥát al-Makiyya)* and other works, Ibn 'Arabí frequently uses *huwiyya* alone or in construct form with other words, *e.g., huwiyya al-ahadiyya* ("the He-ness of the Divine Oneness"); *huwiyya al-haqq* ("the He-ness of the True One") (Shaykh Muḥyí al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futúḥát al-Makkiyya* ('The Meccan Revelations [Openings]") 4 Vols [Beirut: Dar Ṣadir, n.d.; 1968 = Cairo Ed. 19111).

62. *Futúḥát* II:130.

63. *Iṣtiláḥát*, cited in 'Ah al-Jurjani, *Kitab al-Ta'rifat* (A Book of Definitions) (Reprint, Librairie du Liban, 1985) 395; cf. W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY, 1989) p. 394.

64. Cited in al-Jurjani, *Kitab al-Ta'rifat,* p. 395.

65. 'Abd al-Karim ibn Ibráhím al-Jílí, *al-Insán al-kámil fí ma'rifat al-awákhir wa'l-awá'il.* 2 Vols. in 1 (Cairo: Muṣṭafá al-Bábí al-Ḥalabí, 1375 AH/1956 CE) pp. 1:96, 97.

66. See R. Arnaldez, "Láhút and Násút," *The Encyclopedia of Islam.* Vol. 5 (1960) pp. 611-14.

67. 2:3; see Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance to the Qur'an* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) pp. 479-80.

68. L. Gardet, "God in Islam" in *Encyclopedia of Religion.* Vol. 6 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) p. 28.

69. Ibid., p. 31.

*70.* Nasr, "God," p. 312.

71. E. M. Al-Sharkawi, "The Aristotelian Categories and the Problem of Attributes in Islamic Theology" in *Graeco-Islamica,* Vol. 3 (1983) p. 30. The complications of the various categories of the divine attributes cannot be entered into here. See further, for example, Gardet, "God in Islam," pp. 33-34. For some Sunni Muslims, the strict doctrine of *tawḥíd* ("Unity of God") was maintained by holding that the "Attributes of the Essence" were co-eternal with and subsisted in God's Essence. In an inexplicable way, they were not God nor other than God *(bi-la kayf wa bi-la tashbíh;* "Without asking how or comparison").

72. Cited in Bahá'u'lláh, Mírzá Husayn 'Alí. *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá.* Vol. III (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.) p. 15 = *Seven Valleys,* p. 15. Seven Divine Attributes are sometimes called the "Names of the Essence." Ibn 'Arabí reckoned them as [1] "The Living" *(al-Ḥayy)* [2] "the Knowing *(al-'alím)* [3]

"the Wanting" (*al-múrid*) [4] "the Powerful" (*al-qadír*) [5] "the Speaking" (*al-mutakallim / al-qá'il*) [6] "the Hearing" (*al-samí`*) and [7] "the Seeing" (*al-baṣír*). I follow here the translation of M. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Zbn Arabi, The Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) p. 97, referring to various passages in Ibn 'Arabí's *Futúḥát.*

73. Cited in Abú'l-Ḥamíd al-Gházálí, *Mishkut al-anwãr* ed. by Abú 'Ala 'Afífí (Cairo: Dar al-Qaymiya li'l-Ṭabá'a wa'l-Nashara, 1383/1964) p. 39.

*74. Encyclopedia Zranica VZ,* ed. by E. Yarshater, Vol. 6 (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1993) p. 317. Worth noting in this respect is the following spontaneous supplication for the month of Ramaḍán transmitted by Abi 'Abd Allah (Imám Ja'far al-Ṣádiq, d. c. 669-700) in which six pavilions are spoken about relative to specific divine attributes: "0 my God! I verily, ask Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Glory (*surádiqu'l-majd*) and I beseech Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Splendour (*surádiqu'l-bahá'*). I verily, ask Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Grandeur (*surádiqu'l-'azamat*) and I beseech Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Radiance (*surádiqu'l-jalál*). I verily, ask Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Might (*surádiqu'l-'izzat*) and I beseech Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Secrets (*surádiqu'l-sara'ir*) which is Foremost (*al-sábíq*) Paramount (*al-fá'iq*) Beauteous (*al-ḥusn*) Splendid (*al-naḍír*). And by the Lord of the Eight [Arch-l Angels (*al-malá'ikatu'l-thamániyat*) and the Lord of the Mighty Celestial Throne (*rabbu'l-`arshu'l-`aẓím*)." (Cited in Muhammad Báqir Bihar Majlisi, *Biar al-anwár*[2], 105 Vols (Beirut: Dar Iḥyá al-turath al-'Arabi, 1956-72) p. 58:43, from *al-Iqbál* of Sayyid Raḍíy al-Din ibn Táwús 1193-1266).

*75.* Káfí, I:92.

76. From the Arabic *Enneuds* fragments, cited in Walker, "An Ismá'ílí Answer," p. 13.

77. P. Morewedge, *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992) p. viii.

78. Fazlur Rahman succinctly sums up the influence of Neoplatonic streams of thought about the One into early Islam: "On the basis of the Plotinian idea of the ultimate ground of Reality the One of Plotinus, as interpreted by his followers and endowed with a mind that contained the essences of all things, the philosophers reinterpreted and elaborated the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the Unity of God. According to the new doctrine, God was represented as Pure Being without essence or attributes, His only attribute being necessary existence. The attributes of the Deity were declared to be either negations or purely external relations, not affecting His Being and reducible to His necessary existence. God's knowledge was thus defined as 'non-absence of knowable things from Him'; His Will as 'impossibility of constraint upon His Being'; His creative activity as 'emanation of things from Him', etc." (*Islam* [London: University of Chicago Press, 19791 p. 118)

79. *Mishkat al-Anwãr* ("The Niche for Lights") trans. by W. H. T Gairdner (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1952) p. 107.

80. D. B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) p. 179.

81. Ibn 'Arabí, *Futúḥát* II, p. 257; Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 60.

82. Ibn 'Arabí, *Futúḥát* II, p. 502.

83. Cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 62

84. *Futúḥát* I, p. 230.

85. *Futúḥát* II, p. 557; cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 62.

86. Walker, "An Ismá'ílí Answer," p. 7.

87. P. E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abú Ya'qúb al-Sijistãní.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 40f.

88. *Kitáb al-Iftikhar,* cited in Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism,* p. 78. The unknowability of the God beyond attributes is also discussed in the *Rasá'il Ikhwánu'l-safá'* ("Treatises of the Brethren of Purity." 10th cent. CE?) which show the influence of various schools of Hellenistic wisdom (I. R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982) p. 39f).

89. Shaykh Ahmad Al-Asá'í, *Tafsir Súratu'l-Tawḥíd* (Kirmán: al-Sa'ada, 1379/1958–59) p. 15.

90. The new *basmalah* of the Báb is used, for example, throughout the Arabic *Bayán* (1847/8). It also prefixes a fairly large number of tablets of Bahá'u'lláh.

91. The *Du'a al-ṣabáḥ* ("Dawn Prayer") can be found, for example, in 'Abbas al-Qummi, *Mafatíḥ al-jinán* (Beirut: Dar al-aḍwá', 1409/1989) pp. 91-94. Clarification of a phrase within it was requested of the Báb by a certain Mirza Muhammad 'Ah, the Guilder-the *Tafsir Du'a al-ṣabáḥ* can be found, among other manuscript locations, in Iran National Baha'i Archives Manuscript Collection (INBMC) 100+5 vols (Privately published, 132–134/1976–1978) 40, p. 155-62.

92. al-Qummi, *Mafatíḥ al-jinán,* p. 9.

93. INBMC, 40, pp. 155-59.

94. The hadith of *'amá'* is found in a variety of forms in a number of Sunni and Shi'i sources. The word *'amá'* (loosely "Cloud") has been variously translated and interpreted. For some details, see Stephen Lambden, "An Early Poem of Mirza Husayn 'Ah Bahá' Allah: The Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing (*Rashḥ-i'Amá'*)" in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin,* vol. 3, no. 2 (Sept. 1984) pp. 4-114. For Sufis like 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. c. 1420) *'amá'* indicated the absolute hiddenness of the transcendent godhead. It signified "Being sunk in itself, bare potentiality," "the eternal and unchangeable ground of Being," the "absolute inwardness (*buṭún*) and occultation (*istitar*)" of the transcendent divine Essence (*al-insán* 1:50f; R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) pp. 94-96).

95. This letter of the Báb is contained in *Tafsír hadíth al-'amá'* (6007C:1ff. 6007 C:l-16). It was apparently written in reply to questions posed by Siyyid Yahyá Dárábí, Vahid (a leading disciple of the Báb; see Fáḍil-i-Mazandarani, *Asrár al-athár,* vol. 4 (N.c.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) p. 391 (text also partially quoted here).

96. One another level, *'amá'* and *hawá'* ("air") indicate the created *nafs* ("Self") of God, as opposed to the mystery of God's transcendent and uncreated reality. God's being in *'amá'* is expressive of the station (*maqám*) of the manifestation (*ẓuhúr*) of the "First Dhikr" (*dhikr al-awwál*; the primal divine manifestation and locus of prophethood).

97. Various modes of the divine theophany (*tajallí*) are mentioned in Sufi treatises; i.e., (1) *tajallí al-dhát* ("the theophany of the Divine Essence"); (2) *tajallí al-ṣifát* ("the theophany of the Divine Attributes") and *(3) tajallí al-af ál* ("the theophany of the Divine Actions").

98. Q. 50:16b; see INBMC, vol. 40, pp. 180-92.

99. See INBMC, vol. 40, pp. 181-83ff.

100. See INBMC, vol. 69, p. 14f.

101. The *Khuṭba al-ṭutunjiyya* ("Sermon of the Gulf') is found in various sources including Rajab al-Bursi, *Masháriq al-Anwár* (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1978) pp. 166-70; and 'Alí Yazdi Hã'irí, *Ilzám al-Náib,* vol. 2 (Beirut: Mu'assat al-A'lámí lil-Mabú'át, 1404\1984) pp. 242-52. For an introduction and full translation, see Lambden and Fananapazir, 1996 (forthcoming). As both the spelling and vowelling of the consonants of *tutunjiyya* vary, this is but one of a number of possibile readings.

102. Both Sayyid Káẓim and the Báb accept this reading (see Sayyid Káẓim, *Sharh Khuṭba al-futunjiyya* [Tabriz, 1270/1853/4] p. 185ff). The recent edition in Bursi's *Masháriq* reads: "I saw the Mercy of God (*raḥmat Alláh*)" (p. 166), while that printed in Há'irí's *Ilzám al-Náṣib* places a letter *"wáw"* before the word God (*Alláh*) (p. 243).

103. INBMC, vol. 40, p. 179.

104. INBMC, vol. 40, p. 161.

105. *Bayán-i-Fársí*, vol. 4, pp. 1, 105; provisional trans. cf. *al-Bayán al-'Arabí*, vol. 4, p. 1.

106. *Bayán-i-Fársí*, vol. 4, p. *2*, 110; cf. *al-Bayán al-'Arabí*, vol. 4, p. 2.

107. See S. Lambden and K. Fananapazir, 'The Sermon of the Gulf *(Khutba al-Ṭutunjiyya / Ṭat anjiyya)* of Imám 'Ah: An Introduction and Translation with Occasional Notes" in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin,* vol. 9, no. 1 (forthcoming).

108. *Dalá'il-i Sab'ih* (Seven Proofs) of the Báb, 31f; cf. 57f.

109. *See Má'idiy-i Ásmání,* comp. by Ishráq Khávarí, 9 vols. (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 128–9/1972–73) vol. 7, p. 64

110. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. and comp. by Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1949) p. 166; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 103.

111. Anthropopathism is ascribing to the Deity human emotions, passions, or affections.

112. *Gleanings,* p. 165.

113. Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár-i Qalam-i A'lá,* vol. 3 (New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, n.d.) pp. 114-15; *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys,* trans. by 'Alí Kuli Khan assisted by Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) pp. 22-23.

114. *The Hidden Words,* trans. by Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975) p. 20.

115. This tablet is listed by Shoghi Effendi in his list of "Bahá'u'lláh's Best-Known Writings." As far as I am aware, it has not been published. I have relied on a typed Arabic copy supplied to me in 1986 by the Baha'i World Center (Haifa, Israel).

116. In Islamic theosophy and mysticism as well as in Bábí and Bahá'í texts, the Arabic letter "H" *(ha')* and the masculine pronoun *Huwa/Hú* are given kabbalistic, cosmological, and esoteric significances. In his *Iṣṭiláḥát.* ("Sufi Lexicon") Ibn 'Arabí interprets *Hú* ("He") to signify "the Unseen [God] *(al-ghayb)* Whom it is not fitting to observe" (cited in Ali Al Jurjání, *Kitáb al-Ta'rífát* (A *Book of Definitions)* [Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1985] p. 395).

117. The Báb accorded various titles to his followers ranging, for example, from being part of the pleroma of (subordinate) divinity (*ulúhiyy / rubúbiyya*) to being a "mirror" (*maráya*) or "mirror of *God" (mir'at Allah).* Mírzá Yaḥyá is known to have been among those accorded this latter title by the Báb.

118. *See Má'idiy-i-Ásmání,* vol. 9, pp. 22-23.

119. *See Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1930) vol. 3, p. 485 (= SW IV/18:304 = Horace Holley, ed., *Bahá'í Scriptures (New* York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1928) No. 847, pp. 459-60; cf. SW III/14:8f).

*120. Majmu'ih-i Alwaḥ-i Mubáraka* (Reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978) p. 307ff; trans. *Gleanings,* pp. 60, 62-63.

121. *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá,* vol. 3, p. 40. Also worth noting in this context is the fact that in the *Jawáhiru'l-Asrár* seven mystic stages are outlined, the last of them being a transcendent city without name or designation and unutterable (86ff). Therein the "Sun of the Unseen" *(shamsu'l-ghayb)* blazes forth from the "Horizon of the Unseen" *(ufqu'l-ghayb).* In its universe are spheres with moons generated from light which dawn forth and set in the "Ocean of the Unseen" (*bahru'l-ghayb*). None but God and the "Manifestations of His Self" (*maẓáhir nafsihi)* are aware of this realm and its recondite mysteries (*Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá,* vol. 3, p. 86ff).

122. *Kitáb-i-Íqán,* p. 74; trans., p. 64.

123. *Kitáb-i-Íqán,* p. 73; trans., pp. 63-64.

124. *Kitáb-i-Íqán,* p. 107f/ trans., p. 89ff.

125. *Mufawadat,*. p. 166; trans., *Some Answered Questions,* p. 220.

126. Ibid., p. 176; trans. *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 220-21

127. N. M. Hosseini, *Dr. Henry Auguste Fore1* (Dundas, Ontario: Persian Institute for Bahá'í Studies,1989) pp. 101-2.

128. Ibic.; trans. *Some Answered Questions,* p. 220-21.

129. *Mufawadat,* p. 113; *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 148-49.

130. *See Má'idiy-i-Ásmání,* vol. 2, p. 102.

131. *See Gleanings,* p. 3ff.

132. Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1947) pp. 22-23.

133. Ibid., p. 122.

134. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File,* comp. by Helen Hornby, 2d ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 1724, p. 511.

135. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas,* vol. 1, p. 204.

136. *See Some Answered Questions,* p. 116f; trans., p. 154f.

137. "What is meant by personal God is a God Who is conscious of His creation, Who has a Mind, a Will, a Purpose, and not, as many scientists and materialists believe, an unconscious and determined force operating in the universe. Such conception of the Divine Being, as the Supreme and ever present Reality in the world, is not anthropomorphic, for it transcends all human limitations and forms, and does by no means attempt to define the essence of Divinity which is obviously beyond any human comprehension. To say that God is a personal Reality does not mean that He has a physical form, or does in any way resemble a human being. To entertain such belief would be sheer blasphemy" (from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, April 21, 1939, cited in *Lights of Guidance,* p. 477 No 1574).

138. *See The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 147f.

139. *The Seven Valleys,* p. 9.

140. Cited in *Áthár-i Qalam-i A'lá,* vol. 3, p. 127; trans. *Seven Valleys,* p. 34.

141. Cited in *Seven Valleys,* p. 39.

*142. Knowing the Unknowable God,* p. 109.

143. M. Sells, "Apophasis in Plotinus" in *Harvard Theological Reuiew,* Vol. 78 (1985) p. 47. Michael Sells' recently published *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) is an important contribution to the mysticism of *apophasis,* "speaking away." It came to my attention too late to make use of in the writing of this paper.

# BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

*Juan R. I. Cole*

The tragedy of global poverty in the late twentieth century has increasingly preoccupied thinkers of all religions, both lay and clerical, as secular strategies for overcoming it have achieved only limited and sectional successes. New theologies addressing the concerns of the poor are in many ways attempting to recover the voice of the prophets, rather than limiting themselves to the otherworldly concerns of scholastic theologians.1 Prophets throughout history have, after all, tended to side with the poor against the rich, if not politically then at least morally and spiritually. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible decried injustice toward the downtrodden. The Buddha, a prince, forsook the ephemeral material world to wander with destitute monks in the forests near Benares. Jesus, an artisan-peasant, was a partisan of the needy and the outcasts in his society, and had a low estimation of the likelihood that the rich would enter the kingdom of heaven. The Prophet Muhammad, an orphaned member of the noble Quraysh tribe, thunderously condemned in his early preaching the callousness of Mecca's wealthy elite toward the indigent. Bahá'u'lláh, as well, made the amelioration of the condition of the poor a prime goal of his religion, laying heavy obligations in this regard upon private individuals, religious institutions, and the state.

Bahá'u'lláh's commitments are all the more remarkable given that he was from the class of wealthy government officials and was raised in the lap of luxury. For the sake of principle (first his embrace of the

Bábí religion, then his revelation of the Baha'i Faith) he relinquished his wealth and threw in his lot with the laborers, cobblers, tailors, shopkeepers, housewives, and peasants who constituted the majority of Bábís and then Baha'is. As a result, not only was he left impoverished, but he was also subject to exile and harsh jailings. He said that when he was imprisoned in the shah's dungeon in Tehran in 1852, he did not have a dinar to his name and at one point was given nothing to eat or drink for two days, but he was at that point the richest person in the world.2

The idea of liberation is integral to the Baha'i Faith, for Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "the Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty."[3] Bahá'u'lláh was a Manifestation of God become poor to enrich humankind, become inmate to set us all free. Elsewhere he specifies that he acquiesced in his imprisonment in order to free human beings from the chains of "self and passion" (*nafs va hava*).[4] Selfishness is intimately wrought up with questions of the distribution of wealth in society. The Baha'i scriptures, like the life of their Author, evince a special commitment to the poor, though they embrace universally all human beings.

This faith in the downtrodden may help explain why most Baha'is have been, and are today, drawn from the ranks of the poor. Such groups as the impoverished weavers of Kashan or the suffering tailors of Shiraz constituted the bulk of early Bahá'ís.[5] Since the 1960s, masses of peasants, both men and women, have entered the Baha'i Faith in India, Africa, and Latin America. The typical Baha'i in the 1990s is a poor villager in the global South. Even in the United States, about one-third of the national community consists of African-Americans, and a third of them in turn live in South Carolina and northern Georgia, two of the least wealthy areas in the country.6 The Baha'i Faith lacks any class of official clergy, and since local Baha'i affairs are directed not by a seminary-trained clergyman appointed from above, but by elected Spiritual Assemblies, Baha'i peasants, sharecroppers and workers have a real voice in the spiritual governance of their communities.

It is therefore appropriate, in a volume aimed at exploring the possibilities of a Baha'i theology, that we consider the scriptural sources of a Baha'i theology of liberation. As I intimated above, the

starting point for any serious such line of thought must be the groundbreaking work of Catholic theologians (especially Gustavo Gutierrez) and laypeople in Latin America, to whom I am grateful for many key insights that resonate across religious boundaries, and my debt to whom will be apparent below to anyone familiar with this literature.7 It is desirable that Baha'i pioneers and anthropologists inform us more fully about the daily, lived theology of poor Bahá'ís in the global South, so that we in the North can gain essential spiritual insights from them. My purpose here is simply to make a beginning, by examining what I think are key texts by and about Baha'u'llah, for even theology done from the underside of history must have a foundation in scripture and in theophanology (the Person of the Manifestation of God). I will focus here on Baha'u'llah (even though extremely important perspectives exist on this issue in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice) simply for reasons of lack of space and the desirability of beginning with the revelation of the Manifestation of God himself.

It is worth saying briefly that by a Bahá'í theology of liberation I mean a theology that is grounded in a special commitment to the poor and the workers (male and female, adult and child), that includes their perspective in the consideration of scriptural meaning, and that underpins reformist thought and social action by them and by others in solidarity with them. It recognizes that late international capitalism, while capable of creating much wealth, also does a very poor job of distributing it equitably, thereby contributing to continued poverty in some regions and social sectors. This capitalist order also subjects the poor disproportionately to the dangers of an excessive industrialism, especially environmental pollution and hazards of the workplace.

By a theology of revolution I do not, and cannot as a Baha'i, intend, on the one hand, any way of thinking that sanctions violence or class warfare, or indeed, entanglement in the petty squabbles of party politics. On the other hand, a Baha'i theology of liberation must involve speaking out against injustice and engaging in social activism in order to have any meaning. Liberation, in this view, would consist in nothing less than a truly Bahá'í society, which would provide employment at a fair wage to every citizen; would ensure a decent and dignified life to all; would guarantee basic human rights as outlined in United Nations declarations and covenants; would give the less well-off a voice in their own governance and scope for expressing their

spiritual and creative energies; and would eliminate the vast gap between the wealthy and the poor characteristic of late capitalist societies. In the post-Cold War world, wherein the materialist and totalitarian vision of state-imposed economic equality has collapsed, wherein the excesses of industrialism and of laissez-faire capitalism are largely unrestrained and the gap between the poor in the global South and the rich in the North is growing, the world desperately needs a new vision of spiritual and social justice such as Bahá'u'lláh enunciates.

## THE POOR IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY MIDDLE EAST

The struggle of the poor is not everywhere and always the same, depending rather on the sort of social system and the historical moment in which they subsist. Bahá'u'lláh was addressing a society very different from any that still exists today. The Middle East of his day was ruled by the absolute monarchies of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran, and a variety of political economies uneasily coexisted therein. In the 1860s and 1870s, perhaps a third of Iranians were still pastoral nomads, most of them organized into tribes (the percentage was less in most Ottoman possessions, with the exception of Iraq). Although the tribes often lacked formal title to land, they did possess substantial wealth in the form of livestock, and every tribal family had at least a few sheep or goats. But in subsequent decades, most nomads were made to settle by the state, and in the process, tribespeople frequently lost their herds and any claim to tribal lands, being reduced to the worst of fates-that of landless peasants. Some fifty percent of the population of Iran consisted of villagers, divided into landless peasants, smallholders, and medium and rich peasants. Many villages were still actually owned by semi-feudal landlords, and all paid heavy taxes to nobles, to governors, and to the king. Some twenty percent of the population lived in cities (less in Ottoman lands), where the majority were laborers and artisans. In the cities also lived the absentee landlords, landholding government officials, and the great merchants.

This social structure of cities, villages and tribes was anything but static, coming under new pressures throughout the period 1850–1900. This half-century saw a vast expansion of agrarian capitalism (but not yet much substantial industrialization in the area).

Subsistence farming was giving way to the cash-cropping of cotton, tobacco, grains, and opium. Imported European industrial goods were putting thousands of Middle Eastern artisans out of work. Governments, used to taxing land, were not very good at adapting to the new importance of commerce, with many great merchants enjoying an exemption from taxes. The population of the region began growing by leaps and bounds from about 1850, increasing the supply of labor faster than the numbers of new job opportunities (and therefore keeping wages low), and reducing the size of family farms through estate fragmentation. The landless and smallholding peasants, day laborers, and displaced artisans (such as weavers) were or became the poorest of the poor, sometimes even starving to death during famines such as that of 1869-1872 in Iran.8

## BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND THE POOR

The first indication we have of Bahá'u'lláh's attitude toward the poor comes in his Baghdad-era collection of mystical aphorisms, The Hidden Words (1858). His emphasis at this point is largely personal and ethical rather than institutional.9 He continually draws a contrast between the dangers and powerful temptations of wealth versus the virtue of poverty. "Busy not thyself with this world," he writes, "for with fire We test the gold, and with gold We test Our servants." (Arabic, No. 55) He adds, "Thou dost wish for gold and I desire thy freedom from it." (Arabic, No. 56) Baha'u'llah castigates wealth as "a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire" and warns that "the rich, but for a few, shall in no wise attain the court of His presence nor enter the city of contentment and resignation." (Arabic, No. 53) Hardheartedness and selfishness especially afflict the wealthy: "Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth." (Persian, No. 49) Wealth is, then, a test, a barrier, an obstacle to spiritual progress and the attainment of union with the beloved (a Sufi metaphor for a feeling of oneness with the divine that is the goal of the seeker). It carries with it the risk of indifference to the plight of the less fortunate, a moral and spiritual lapse that inexorably ends in doom.

If being rich is a drawback on the path, being poor is an asset. Baha'u'llah says, "Yet to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift,

belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God." (Persian, No. 51) Since he recognizes the grief of the impoverished, having spoken of the "midnight sighing of the poor," Bahá'u'lláh does not glamorize their lives. He does say that they are beloved of God because of their poverty, and that the undeniable hardships they face can be aids to spiritual advance, aids not naturally available to the comfortable bourgeoisie or opulent nobility. By the poor, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that he is referring to the working poor and the poor who want to work if only they might find employment, for he commands all to engage in arts and crafts, and to provide for their loved ones. (Persian, Nos. 80, 82)

On the social and human plane, Bahá'u'lláh insists that all human beings are equal: "Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other." (Arabic, No. 68) Elsewhere, he wrote, in the same vein: "0 ye rich ones on earth! If ye encounter one who is poor, treat him not disdainfully. Reflect upon that whereof ye were created. Every one of you was created of a sorry germ."[10] The rich and their apologists in every age have a tendency to justify their affluence, often by asserting their innate superiority. But this is not a claim that Bahá'u'lláh will countenance, insisting instead on the universal unity of humankind: "Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land." (Arabic, No. 68) The poor, then, are spiritually superior to the rich and are their equals in civil society. Bahá'u'lláh's attitude in this regard is extremely challenging. Certainly, many in the Ottoman and Iranian upper classes would have shrunk in horror from the idea of sitting down to eat with the poor, or from being one with them in any meaningful way. Bahá'u'lláh was just as antagonistic to the hierarchies of Mediterranean society as Jesus Christ had been nearly two millenia before. His call for unity among persons of the various social classes clearly requires an active attempt on their part to mix and break down neighborhood and cultural barriers.

Bahá'u'lláh is also clear about what the rich can do to lessen the spiritual opprobrium he has laid upon them: They must "cleanse themselves" of the "defilement of riches," for only through detachment from material things can they pursue the spiritual path. (Persian, No. 55) Nor is it enough, for instance, to make over one's wealth to a family member and then pursue the cleansing of the soul. "Bestow My

wealth," he commands, "upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendor and treasures of imperishable glory." (Arabic, No. 57) Elsewhere he speaks of the absolute responsibility of the wealthy for the welfare of the needy: "0 ye rich ones on earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease." (Arabic, No. 54)

The vast inequalities of wealth characteristic of modern societies can often only be maintained by authoritarian and repressive state structures acting on behalf of the wealthy elite. Here, too, Bahá'u'lláh is unequivocal: "0 oppressors on earth! Withdraw your hands from tyranny, for I have pledged Myself not to forgive any man's injustice. This is My covenant which I have irrevocably decreed in the preserved tablet and sealed it with My seal of glory." (Persian, No. 64) When Bahá'u'lláh praises the wealthy who are not "hindered" by their "riches from the eternal kingdom" (Persian, No. 53), it seems in view of these other passages that provision for the poor and commitment to social and political justice are implied along with faith as a prerequisite for attaining such splendor.

The circumstances of Bahá'u'lláh's life threw him in with the poor. In 1854-56, he lived the life of a wandering holy man or dervish (*darvish*, a word literally meaning "poor") in Iraqi Kurdistan, dwelling alone in a cave for a while and then consorting with other dervishes and Sufis in Sulaymaniyyah. Even once he had returned to Baghdad, where he lived as a despised exile expelled from his country for heresy, his life was by no means one of ease. "There was a time in 'Iraq," he recalled, "when the Ancient Beauty . . . had no change of linen. The one shirt He possessed would be washed, dried and worn again."[11] Communal sharing and an obliteration of the usual social hierarchies characterized the life of the Bábí partisans of Bahá'u'lláh. They lived in very humble dwellings in Baghdad, and the disciple Nabil-i A'zam Zarandi occupied, with two other men, a room that had no furniture. Bahá'u'lláh, he says, came to the room one day and remarked: "Its emptiness pleases Me. In my estimation it is preferable to many a spacious palace, inasmuch as the beloved of God are occupied in it with the remembrance of the Incomparable Friend."[12] Nabil reports: "Many a night no less than ten persons subsisted on no more than a pennyworth of dates. No one knew to whom actually belonged the shoes, the cloaks or the robes that were to be found in their houses. . . . Their own names they had forgotten, their hearts were emptied of aught else

except adoration for their Beloved."[13] The severity of a room without furniture, the comradeship of intermingled possessions, the nights of communal meditation and ecstatic worship in the presence of their beloved Bahá'u'lláh, make this band of his Bábí followers icons for the virtues of the poor.

In Baghdad in the early 1860s, Baha'u'llah used to meet occasionally with Iranian princes of the Qajar house. Often such persons were out of favor with the shah and had taken refuge outside Iran near the Shi'i shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, not far from Baghdad in Ottoman Iraq. He would inquire as to the political situation in Tehran. They complained at one point, however, that he never discussed spiritual issues with them, only worldly ones. In reply, Baha'u'llah set very stringent standards for his willingness to converse on things of the spirit. To one of the princes, Bahá'u'lláh said, "My purpose in coming to this corrupt world where the tyrants and traitors, by their acts of cruelty and oppression, have closed the doors of peace and tranquillity to all mankind, is to establish, through the power of God and His might, the forces of justice, trust, security and faith."[14] He says that when these aims have been achieved, an attractive woman wearing jewelry should be able to travel all over the earth without fear of molestation, given the high standards of trustworthiness and justice that would have been attained. Bahá'u'lláh's choice of example is interesting in that it focuses on sexual harrassment as a prevailing evil he wishes to see eliminated. Although the example he gives is of a wealthy woman being protected from the lust and greed of men, it goes without saying that most women likely to be sexually harrassed were poor, and so would be the primary beneficiaries of a true Bahá'í society.

Another example which Bahá'u'lláh provided the princes had to do with self-renunciation:

> Suppose there is a very rich person whose wealth is enormous and beyond measure. And suppose that gradually and in the course of time he bestows so much of his wealth upon a poor person that he himself is reduced to absolute poverty while the poor man has turned into a very rich man. . . Suppose in his poor and distressed state he reaches a situation in which he incurs some small debt. Being unable to pay it, he is brought to a public square in town where he is humilated and punished. He is further informed that his release will not be considered until he pays his debt. At this point suppose he sees his friend (who once was poor and as a result of his generosity has become rich). Should the thought

> flash through his mind that he wishes that in return for all his generosity to him, this friend would now come forward and relieve him of this calamity, immediately all his deeds would become void, he would become deprived of the virtue of contentment and acquiescence, and would be shut away from the virtues of the human spirit.[15]

Personal obligations or individual gratitude, BahB'u'llah says, are not the point of his teachings on detachment from the material world. Thus, he says, if the second man, grown rich at the expense of the first, is tempted to help him out of specific gratitude, he too is lost. The only worthy motive is a universal one, irrespective of person. Love, giving, and responsibility to others must be all-encompassing. This principle is crucial, since otherwise the rich will help only the poor they know personally, and the poor so assisted will be more clients than simply fellow human beings.

In Edirne, where BahB'u'llah was kept in exile (1863–1868) by the Ottoman government, he continued to address the problem of the poor. His discourse here, however, takes on a more institutional tone, as he begins elaborating the bases of the new Bahá'í religion and considering its relationship to the governments of the world. In the Surah of God (*Suratu'llah*, ca. Spring, 1866), BahB'u'llah writes that a subject is better than a thousand rulers, a subordinate is more exalted than a myriad of superiors, and one oppressed is more excellent than a city full of tyrants. He urges the Bahá'ís to emulate Baha'u'llah himself in severing themselves from all things.16 These pronouncements have the effect of turning upside down conventional social distinctions based on wealth and power. The subaltern is better than the elite, and the oppressed superior to the oppressor. Here, as in the Hidden Words and Five Treasures, Baha'u'llah condemns political tyranny along with excessive attachment to the things of this world, perhaps a clue that he thought the two things went together. Later, in the 'Akká period, he pointed out that many of the rich had been prevented by their riches from accepting the Bahá'í Faith, whereas many of the poor had attained to the mystical knowledge (*'irfan*) of God.[17]

In the early-'Akka-period Surah of Utterance (*Surátu'l-Bayán*), BahB'u'llah reaffirmed the ethical foundations of his teachings on wealth and poverty. "Withhold not from the poor," he wrote, "the gifts which the grace of God hath bestowed upon you. He, verily, shall recompense the charitable, and doubly repay them for what they have bestowed."[18] In the same work, he reaffirms that God loves the poor, not because they are good, but because they are poor and suffering. He says:

> If ye meet the abased or the down-trodden, turn not away disdainfully from them, for the King of Glory ever watcheth over them and surroundeth them with such tenderness as none can fathom except them that have suffered their wishes and desires to be merged in the Will of your Lord, the Gracious, the All-Wise. 0 ye rich ones of the earth! Flee not from the face of the poor that lieth in the dust, nay rather befriend him and suffer him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted. By the righteousness of God! Whilst ye consort with him, the Concourse on high will be looking upon you, will be interceding for you will be extolling your names and glorifying your action. [19]

The rich are urged, not simply to "give to the poor" in a cold or abstract way, but to actually befriend them and listen to their accounts of the travails through which they have lived. This very act of listening is itself raised to the station of a deed that brings the intercession of the Concourse on High.

In his Tablet to the Kings (*Surátu'l-Mulúk*) of the late Edirne period, Bahá'u'lláh, virtually alone and a political and religious prisoner under house arrest and in internal exile, dared address the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz, his jailer. He urged the sultan not to pay his ministers and aides so well that they would be enabled to "lay up riches for themselves" or to be "numbered with the extravagant." He attacks the vast extremes of wealth he witnessed in the Ottoman imperial capital, where destitute rural immigrants lived near rich landlords, tax-farmers, and import-export merchants. He says: "We observed upon Our arrival in the City [Istanbul]" that some of its inhabitants "were possessed of an affluent fortune and lived in the midst of excessive riches, while others were in dire want and abject poverty. This ill beseemeth thy sovereignty, and is unworthy of thy rank."[20] The huge wealth inequalities visible in a Mediterranean city like Istanbul during the incipient Age of Capital shocked and dismayed Bahá'u'lláh. He correctly saw that government officials were among the chief exploiters of the people, amassing private fortunes from their public service, and warned the sultan not to "aggrandize thy ministers at the expense of thy subjects. Fear the sights 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." He calls the poor the ruler's "treasures on earth" and urges him to safeguard them from those who wish to rob and expropriate them. "Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every

year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty."[21] Not only do the rich owe an absolute responsibility to the poor, but so does the government. The state is charged with intervening against excessive extremes of wealth and poverty, and of continually monitoring the welfare of the citizenry.

The implicit danger to the poor here is overtaxation, especially the imposition of fraudulent or unwarranted taxes by state officials seeking to line their own pockets. Bahá'u'lláh identifies, in addition, another motive for excessive levies on the destitute, the arms race engaged in by modern states. He instructs the rulers of the earth to "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." He urges states to engage in proactive peace-making of a sort that will allow them to have low military expenditures, and to maintain something akin to militias for self-defense rather than armies for conquest. He complains bitterly: "We have learned that you are increasing your outlay every year, and are laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is more than they can bear, and is a grievous injustice." He reaffirms that the poor are "the trust of God" in the midst of the rulers, and warns them against betraying that trust.[22]

The Tablet to the Kings is remarkable in subordinating the issue of world peace, a key teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, to that of the elimination of poverty. That is, one of the primary reasons given for the implementation of a peaceful world order is that this step will reduce military budgets and in turn allow lower rates of taxation on those least able to afford it. The corollary of this principle is the implication that martial, praetorian states create poverty and social injustice. In the beginning of his own independent ministry, then, Baha'u'llah goes beyond the ethical and mystical aspects of wealth and poverty that had preoccupied him in his Baghdad-era works, now addressing the role of the state. The government is responsible, in his view, for keeping the salaries of officials reasonable and taxes low and for continually inquiring into the condition of the poor and the means of improving it. This view of the responsibilities of the state, it should be noted, differs radically from that espoused by most nineteenth-century reformers, whether in the Middle East or Europe. Bahá'u'lláh's anti-militarism and his dim view of extremes of wealth and poverty clearly place him on the progressive end of the spectrum in the political discourse of the time.

In the early 'Akká period, from 1868, Baha'u'llah denounced the tyranny of the Ottoman state in no uncertain terms (*Lawh-i Fu'ád*) and began praising British-style parliamentary democracy. He praised Queen Victoria, in his tablet to her, for abolishing slavery and putting the reins of democratic governance (which he called, in nineteenth-century Middle Eastern parlance, "counsel") in the hands of the people. The word he uses for "people" (an-nas) indicates the common people, and it is clear that here he not only advocates that the state work for the interests of the poor, but also insists that the poor should have a voice in their own governance. His abolition of slavery reaffirms the inherent dignity of every human being before God, and it implies, by analogy, that not only classical slavery but also any form of unpaid or barely paid bondage is illicit.

In his Most Holy Book (*Kitáb-i **Aqdas;*** 'Akká, 1873), Bahá'u'lláh reaffirms the democratic principle, predicting that Iran would undergo a revolution and be ruled by a democracy of the people (*jumhur an-nas*).[23] Bahá'u'lláh's principle that Baha'i communities should be administered by local Houses of Justice (currently called local Spiritual Assemblies) comprised of lay believers also gave a voice to the poor. In a village, local Baha'i community policy is not made by a clergyman from the urban middle class posted to the countryside, but rather by the villagers themselves, who enjoy universal adult suffrage and freely elect representatives to the local Spiritual Assemblies. Again, in the 1990s, the vast majority of local Spiritual Assembly members are what most of those in the global North would consider "poor." Baha'u'llah instructed that the local Spiritual Assemblies make their decisions through "consultation," a process that allows a multitude of voices to be heard and encourages individuals to seek the truth and the best course, rather than to cling stubbornly to their initial opinions.

Several of the laws Bahá'u'lláh enacted in the Most Holy Book were aimed at improving the situation of the poor. He designates them as appropriate recipients of gifts during the annual Bahá'í festival, Ayyam-i Ha, in which presents are given prior to the period of the Fast.[24] He insists on universal education for children (in most of the world at that time, children received schooling only if their parents could afford to pay for it, and this is still the case in much of the global South) and makes the House of Justice responsible for providing instruction to indigent children.[25] Since education is a key to improved skills and economic independence, and since the education

of women brings down birth rates and allows them greater economic independence, universal education provided by social institutions such as the state or religious bodies can have an important impact on poverty. Also in the Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh ordains the payment by Baha'is of *zakat*, a form of alms originating in Islam.26 In contemporary Muslim countries such as Pakistan, *zakat* is formally assessed as a 2.5 percent annual levy on liquid wealth (principally bank accounts), and the funds are distributed in poor neighborhoods. Bahá'ís in the West have not yet begun paying *zakat,* but its implementation would be a significant step forward in providing funds for a proactive role by Bahá'í institutions in working with the poor. Although the percentage is small, if the funds were wisely employed they could, alongside governmental and private charitable efforts, have an important impact.

Helping the poor is also among the purposes of the larger Bahá'í tax of nineteen percent on profits or accumulated wealth, called the Right of God (*huququ'lláh*).[27] In his own lifetime, Bahá'u'lláh supervised the distribution of the Right of God to indigent Baha'is. One community asked him if they should support the impoverished with these funds, and he replied that this should only be done with his permission-he wanted an accounting of Right of God contributions and the particulars of its possible recipients among the poor. He feared that giving blanket authority for such measures to the new Bahá'í communities in Iran might prove a cause of dissension.[28] (Some who thought themselves deserving might blame the local believers in charge of the funds if they were excluded, whereas no one would argue with Baha'u'llah). Bahá'u'lláh's personal attention to the needs of impoverished Baha'is is quite touching, and his solicitude comes through in his letters, as for instance when he directs that specific sums from the Right of God be given to individuals like "Mr. A. Z." in Khurasan because he is in debt and anti-Bahá'í enemies have mulcted him.29 In a letter to a prominent believer in Shiraz probably written around 1879–80, Baha'u'llah instructs that half the Right of God collected in that city be given to the poor. He adds that the community should strive, however, to see that all are provided with gainful employment, since being reduced to dependence on charity is inappropriate to the station of a human being.30

Baha'u'llah makes the indigent an issue for governmental and religious institutions and gives the poor an active voice in the governance

of both (in contrast to the kings, caliphs, and popes who ruled absolutely in his own day). Nor does he intend by "the poor" only men, for here, as elsewhere, he is concerned to overturn the gender inequities of patriarchy. He says that "the servants of God and His handmaidens are regarded on the same Plane." Devoted Baha'i women, he writes, "excel over men in the sight of God. How numerous are the heroes and knights in the field who are bereft of the True One and have no share in His recognition."[31]

Baha'u'llah envisages the rich working with the poor to change the world:

> They who are possessed of riches, however, must have the utmost regard for the poor, for great is the honor destined by God for those poor who are steadfast in patience. By My life! There is no honor, except what God may please to bestow, that can compare to this honor. Great is the blessedness awaiting the poor that endure patiently and conceal their sufferings, and well is it with the rich who bestow their riches on the needy and prefer them before themselves.
>
> Please God, the poor may exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood. This is a duty which, in this most great Revelation, hath been prescribed unto every one, and is accounted in the sight of God as a goodly deed. Whoso observeth this duty, the help of the invisible One shall most certainly aid him. He can enrich, through His grace, whomsoever He pleaseth. He, verily, hath power over all things.[32]

Bahá'u'lláh continually stresses the self-worth, agency, and independent action of the poor themselves, which explains his emphasis on the need to earn a livelihood. Of course, the other side of this coin is the responsibility of the state and the economic system to provide gainful employment for all who seek it, a responsibility implied by Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on governmental responsibility in his Tablet to the Kings.

The patience Baha'u'llah calls for in the poor (a patience he exercised himself, for most of his life) is not a passive, static suffering. It is the patience that eschews violence and hatred while working ceaselessly toward the creation of a new civilization wherein the extremes of wealth and poverty would be eliminated at last. Bahá'u'lláh, in a Persian tablet, says to the devoted Bahá'í poor that they should not despair, for *even in this life* innumerable doors exist, and that the poor should open them with the fingers of volition so as to witness new worlds in this one. He announces that he keeps company with all who are poverty-stricken, gives his solicitude to the oppressed, and gazes

upon the grief-stricken. The delights of the Word of God, he says, transform and efface the bitterness of this ephemeral world.33 The Word of God does not only solace the poor in their suffering or offer them a "mystical" escape from their pitiful condition. Rather, they are called upon to exercise their own wills in order to take advantage of opportunities for change that exist in this world, with the help of divine benevolence and of the principles revealed in Baha'i scripture. The poor, like other Bahá'ís, are called upon to denounce tyranny and infractions against basic human rights, to work for parliamentary democracy, to allow the expression of the views of the humblest Bahá'í within the community, and to reform the world's economy so as to reflect the divine attribute of justice.

Subsequent Baha'i holy figures, such as Bahá'u'lláh's son and authorized interpreter, 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), and the latter's grandson Shoghi Effendi (Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, 1921–1957), have further elaborated on issues in the theology of liberation. A special commitment to the poor continues to be evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings, which include corporate profit-sharing, binding arbitration of labor disputes, a graduated income tax, a commitment to the abolition of poverty, and the condemnation of workers being impoverished while capitalists grow rich-which he refers to as "industrial slavery." Nevertheless, as 'Abdu'l-Baha makes clear, he does not envisage a classless society, simply a society in which everyone is at least comfortable. In 1875, 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

> Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor-in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society-its possessor will stand out before God and man as the most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise.34

Shoghi Effendi wrote that the "Cause neither accepts the theories of the Capitalistic economics in *full*, nor can it agree with the Marxists and Communists in their repudiation of the principle of private ownership and of the vital sacred rights of the individual."35

From 1908, 'Abdu'l-Baha, in response to the turmoil of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) reversed his earlier support for it

and temporarily adopted a policy of political neutrality.36 This policy has since been maintained, during this early stage of the expansion of the Baha'i faith into a world religion, so as to avoid divisions within the community along political lines. Non-intervention in party politics, however, does not necessarily impede social activism, as Baha'is showed in the United States in the 1980s when they mobilized to work with other groups to aid the ratification of the United Nations Convention on Genocide bill by the U.S. Congress. Practical action for the poor, as with the establishment by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India of numerous vocational schools in that country, are clearly key duties for all Baha'is. Bahá'u'lláh does not prescribe only a sort of paternalistic philanthropy, however. Rather, he urges that the voices of the poor themselves be heard, and that the poor exercise their own volition and agency in changing their condition.

A Baha'i theology of liberation must begin from and take account of key themes in the Revelation of the Manifestation of God for this day. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of having been chained in order to win the release (*itlaq*) of the world from its bondage, and having been imprisoned in the Most Great Fortress in order to emancipate (*'itq;* literally, to manumit from slavery) all peoples. The theme of emancipation is therefore central to Bahá'u'lláh's message and intimately bound up with Bahá'í theophanology. God loves the poor because of their suffering, watching over them and surrounding them with supreme tenderness. The poor, because of their lack of material means, are "rich in God," and their sufferings can aid them on the spiritual path, even if not all among the poor avail themselves of this natural advantage. The rich, in contrast, labor under a vast spiritual disability that can only with the greatest difficulty be overcome. To draw near to the divine Beloved, the rich must invest substantial amounts of their wealth in improving the conditions of the poor, ensuring that the latter are no longer needy. They must be motivated in so doing by nothing less than universal love.

The state has a key role to play, according to Bahá'u'lláh. It must intervene through tax policy and in other ways to prevent the accumulation of vast disparities in wealth between rich and poor, must ensure that taxes on the less-well-off are as low as possible, and must work for peace and world government in order to keep the military budget minimal. It must prevent slavery (and therefore bonded labor) and must give even the poor a voice in government through democratic, parliamentary elections.

Bahá'í institutions themselves have a responsibility to the destitute, to ensure the education of their young and to distribute to the needy the proceeds of the *zakat* alms-tax and some of the Huququ'llah, the "Right of God." Since Baha'i administrative institutions are elected by the local community, the Bahá'ís already have thousands of grassroots village communities governed by and for the poor, which are experimenting with new societal values. Baha'is have a constant duty to remind the rich of the "midnight sighing of the poor." Baha'u'llah throws down the false idol of the market as the unchallenged system for distributing wealth (whatever its virtues in distributing goods). The emphasis here on social action in addition to spiritual concerns is characteristic of the Baha'i Faith, which inherited from Islam both a strong mystical strain and a this-worldly orientation, combining these with a distinctly modern vision. All human beings, Baha'u'llah says, "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."37

The challenge for Baha'is while they are a relatively small community of six million, mostly themselves poor, is to ever remain mindful that involuntary poverty is evil and illegitimate, that the vast wealth of capitalism has frequently been the fruit of the exploitation of workers and peasants ("industrial slavery"), and that structural changes must be introduced and society transformed if things are to change. Charitable work is highly praiseworthy, but within the context of rapaciously materialist societies it always faces the danger of being coopted by the laissez-faire status quo.

Another danger lies in becoming absorbed in the economic theories and minutiae that might underlie a Baha'i social democracy. In the end, what is wanted in a Baha'i theology of liberation is not social policy alone but universal love, not only new bureaucracies but also steadfast faith in the Promised of all Ages, not class struggle but class transcendence, not a patronizing of the poor but their empowerment and enrichment. Social action must be grounded in mystical perception and in faith. As Baha'u'llah instructed us: "Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge."38

What is needed is not choirs singing to one side as corporate union busters intimidate on the shop floor or as the shock troops of an excessive industrialism murder Yanomamo Indians in order to despoil the Amazon rain forest. We are all challenged to listen to the poor-"suffer

him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted"-and join with them in radically critiquing the conditions of our collective existence.

## NOTES

I am grateful for substantive comments on earlier drafts of this paper to John Walbridge, Todd Lawson, Seena Fazel, Khazeh Fananapazir, and J. A. (Jack) McLean.

1. See Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ***ed., World Religions and Human Liberation*** (Maryknoll, MD: Orbis, 1992).

2. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in *Ma'idih-'i* ***Asmani,*** 9 vols. (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) vol. 4, p. 96.

***3. Gleanings from the Writings of*** *Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 99. This passage is from a late-'Akka period work; see Bahá'u'lláh, *al-Kitáb al-Mubin* (Bombay, n.d.) p. 307. All passages in ***Gleanings*** can be found in the original languages in Bahá'u'lláh, ***Muntakhabati az athar-i Hadrat-i*** *Bahá'u'lláh* (Hofheim: Bahá'í Verlag, 1984).

4. Bahá'u'lláh, ***Athar-i*** *Qalam-i A'la*, 7 volumes (Bombay and Tehran: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1890–1978), vol. 7, p. 5.

5. For the nineteenth-century Baha'i community, see my "Religious Dissidence and Urban Leadership: Bahá'ís in Qajar Shiraz and Tehran," in Michael Bonine and Ahmad Ashraf, eds. ***City and Society in Qajar Iran,*** forthcoming. S.V. "Iran," by Moojan Momen, in Moojan Momen and John Walbridge, eds., ***A Short Encyclopaedia of the Baha'i Faith,*** 2 vols. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, forthcoming); and Peter Smith, ***The Babi and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) chapter 6: "The Iranian Baha'i Community, c. 1866-1921." For the impoverished weavers of Kashan, see Haydar 'Ali Isfahani, ***Stories from the Delight of Hearts,*** trans. A. Q. Faizi (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1980) p. 96.

6. See Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, "The Bahá'í Faith, 1957-1988: A Survey of Contemporary Developments," ***Religion*** 19 (1989) pp. 63-91.

7. Important works here include Gustavo Gutierrez, ***The Power of the Poor in History*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984) and Leonardo Boff, ***On the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence,*** trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989). Good discussions of the context of these works include Harvey ***Cox, The Silencing of Leonardo*** *Boff:* ***The Vatican and the Future of World Christianity*** (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer Stone Books, 1988) and Penny Lernoux, ***People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism (New***

York: Viking Penguin, 1989). However, clearly both Bahá'í scripture and the lived experience of Bahá'ís as a distinct religious community have their own individuality, which will become apparent. I am taking the works cited above as starting-points for my own investigation, and am not attempting to simply clone them. Much of the impetus for what I have to say here comes from points made to me by Baha'i workers and villagers in Senegal, Gambia, India, Lebanon, and Jordan.

8. See Charles Issawi, ed., *The Economic History of Iran, 1800–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), and John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

9. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words,* trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979). Below, passages from this work will be cited by number and language (e.g., "Arabic, No. 4").

10. Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,* trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) p. 55.

11. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes* By (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970) p. 137.

12. Bahá'u'lláh, ibid.

13. Nabil Zarandi, Ibid.

14. Baha'u'llah, quoted in Nabíl-i Zarandi, *Panj Ganj* and translated in Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah,* 4 vols. (Oxford: George Ronald, 19741987) vol. 2, p. 141.

15. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 142.

16. Bahá'u'lláh, "Súrat Allah," in *Athar-i Qalám-i A'lá,* vol. 4 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 125B.E./1968) p. 23; Juan R. I. Cole, "Redating the Surah of God (Surat Allah): An Edirne Tablet of 1866?—Provisional Translation Appended" *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* vol. 6:4–7:2 (October 1992) p. 11.

17. Baha'u'llah, *Athár-i Qalám-i A'lá,* vol. 6, p. 241.

18. *Gleanings,* p. 278.

19. Ibid., pp. 314-15.

20. Ibid., p. 235.

21. Ibid., p. 236.

22. Ibid., pp. 250-51.

23. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1992) para. 93.

*24. Kitáb-i-Aqdas,* para. 16

*25. Kitab-i-Aqdas,* para. 48

*26. Kitab-i-Aqdas,* para. 146

27. Bahá'u'lláh in *The Compilation of Compilations,* 2 vols. (Sidney: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) vol. 1, p. 504, cf. vol. 1, p. 515. I am grateful to Seena Faze1 for this citation.

28. Baha'u'llah, *Athar-i Qalám-i A'lá,* vol. 7, pp. 236-37.

*29. Majmu'ih-'i Alváh-i Mubárakí*, p. 196.

*30. Athár-i Qalám-i A'lá*, vol. 6, p. 283.

31. Both passages from Baha'u'llah, quoted in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, p. 358.

*32. Gleanings*, pp. 202-3; Baha'u'llah, *Zqtidarat va Chand Lawh-i Digar* (Bombay: n.p, 1310A.H./1892–93) pp. 291-96.

33. Baha'u'llah, quoted in *Ma'idih-'i Asmání*, vol. 4, p. 96.

*34. The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) pp. 24-25.

35. Quoted in Badi Shams, *A Bahá'í Perspective on Economics of the Future* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) pp. l-2. Earlier points made in this paragraph about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings can also be found in this useful compilation.

36. Juan R.I. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century." *International Journal of Middle East Studies 24* (1992) pp. l-26.

*37. Gleanings*, p. 215.

38. Ibid., p. 285.

# THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS OF SCIENCE

*Anjam Khursheed*

In 1912, during an Open Forum talk in San Francisco, 'Abdu'l-Bahá satirized the then prevailing mood of Western philosophy by describing the cow as one of its leading exponents.1 He stated that the cow was a "professor emeritus" in the school of thought that gave prime importance to the tangible, a philosophy based upon sense-perception as the touch-stone of truth. He was, of course, referring to empiricism normally associated with a line of philosophers starting with Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. Of course, there is more to modern Western philosophy than empiricism, but 'Abdu'l-Baha was speaking in a much more general sense. He cited, for instance, those who reduced the origins of humanity to animal evolution, as prime examples of "philosophers of the West." 'Abdu'l-Baha alluded to empiricism more as an attitude of mind, rather than describing it in terms of a formal philosophy.

Empiricism as an attitude of mind has continued to permeate Western thinking since 'Abdu'l-Baha traveled to the West in the early part of this century. The trend of reducing human nature to animal nature, one of the main themes that 'Abdu'l-Baha opposed in his Western addresses, has been greatly accentuated in the interim. From the successive reductionisms of human nature to resemble unconscious animal drives and the conditioned responses of albino rats, through to the survival instincts of aggressive apes, and more recently, Darwinian survival machines, twentieth-century humans, whether in popular culture or intellectual circles, have increasingly painted

their self-portrait in terms of "cow-like" qualities. Moreover, the empiricism underlying many of the reductions of human nature to either animal or machine, or both, is characterized by an appeal to science as its founding authority.

The behavioral school of psychology, popular in the early to mid-decades of the twentieth century, rejected all human qualities which were not directly observable. The rejection of distinctive human qualities of mind were made by an appeal to the scientific method. In the words of one of the founding fathers of behaviorism, B. F. Skinner, the rejection of free will was characterized as follows: "the hypothesis that man is not free is essential to the application of the scientific method to the study of human behavior."[2] This claim of empiricism to be a philosophy founded on the scientific method has existed from the very beginnings of empiricism as a formal philosophy. In the eighteenth century, David Hume, one of the acknowledged founders of modern empiricism, understood his own work to have extended the physics of Isaac Newton to the study of human nature. This can be seen in the subtitle that Hume gave to one of his famous works, A Treatise of ***Human Nature,*** in which he expressed the intention to "introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects."

An underlying theme of this paper is that the prevailing conception of empiricism, as a philosophy founded on the scientific method, is in fact a misconception. It comes from a naive view of science that differs both from the scientist's own experience and the Bahá'í understanding of science. It should also be pointed out that although empiricism may reflect the general mood of Western philosophy in this century, there have been important exceptions to the empirical trend, some of which will be cited below. Generally speaking, during the latter part of the twentieth century, particularly in academic circles, there has arisen significant opposition to the prevailing empiricist worldview.

## PHILOSOPHIES OF SCIENCE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

One of the more common ways the modern mind pictures science is to see it as a collection of "facts and numbers." Science is perceived as an objective method of observation, hypothesis and experiment. This view of science is generally classed as "positivist." The positivist view portrays science as a method dominated by empirical measurements,

either in observation, experiment, or hypotheses that are constructed according to rigorous methods of logic, whether they be deductive or inductive. Such a description of science, as is well known, was explicitly formulated by the logical positivists in the early part of this century.[3] The positivist conception of science is based upon understanding science through explicit methods of verification which are thought to be objective and independent of moral and spiritual values. A positivist view of science gave rise to value neutralism, the notion that the elimination of value judgments was a necessary precondition to the successful practice of science. A scientific frame of mind came to be closely associated with neutrality vis-a-vis moral commitments.

Although a positivist might insist that it is only within science that one should be value-neutral and that we need not necessarily suspend our commitments to moral values outside science, the line between science and nonscience cannot in practice be so well-defined. Alfred J. Ayer extrapolated on the implications of logical positivism for human values when he stated that they were "literally senseless."[4] This conclusion derives from the assumption that total experience can be adequately described in terms of empirical facts and is closely related to a fact-dominated conception of science. A scientific approach to problem-solving, even if such problems are identified as lying outside science, in such non-scientific activities as religion and art, was associated with a value-neutral approach.

An important point to emphasize about the positivist conception of science is that it understands scientific knowledge to be essentially non-mysterious. From the positivist viewpoint, all that can be meaningfully discovered is to be expressed in terms of the methods of logic and empirical measurements. In the words of one of the founders of logical positivism, Rudolf Carnap: "There are no questions which are in principle unanswerable."[5] The founders of logical positivism understood their philosophy to be based upon strict methods of science which they attempted to use to "decontaminate" the rest of philosophy from "metaphysics."[6] In practice, this entailed the negation of the greater part of theology and human values.

Although logical positivism as a school of philosophy was relatively short-lived (between the two world wars), it expressed important elements of the psychology of the modern worldview. In particular, it emphasized the belief that modern science contains verification tests of truth that other human cultural activities do not possess. The

famous verification principle of logical positivism-the attempt to define all meaningful propositions to be either statements of a logical-mathematical kind or of an experimental factual type-was an example of such a test to distinguish science from other spheres of human activity.7 The verification principle was an attempt to derive a scientific definition of meaning. Logical positivism derived from Hume's empiricist philosophy. The verification principle, for example, was a generalization of "Hume's Fork," which divided all meaningful propositions into either mathematics or sense experience.8

Logical positivism articulated much of the empiricism underlying twentieth-century Western philosophy. Bryan Magee, a professional philosopher who has contributed greatly to making formal philosophy more accessible to the general public, has commented that most educated people in the West are still under the impression that formal philosophy is dominated by logical positivism. He states that "a lot of people-well educated but not in philosophy-are under the impression that contemporary philosophy is logical positivism."[9] In specific areas in formal philosophy, however, particularly within the philosophy of science, logical positivism has received considerable opposition. Only a brief outline of some of these opposing voices will be given here. There is, nevertheless, enough literature to indicate that significant challenges to the prevailing empiricism of Western thought have been mounted. It is too early, however, to assess these influences on Western philosophy beyond the confines of academic circles.

Much of the literature usually cited in the context of the philosophy of science in the twentieth century arose out of a reaction to logical positivism. The philosophy of Karl Popper, for instance, set out to demonstrate the limitations of the notion of "proof' within a positivist conception of science. For Popper, a theory could never be proved absolutely true, only disproved. Popper objected to the step of induction implicit in the positivist's model of science. Popper understood science to advance by a series of "conjectures and refutations."[10] For Popper, theories within science were in effect good guesses which could be falsified by experiment. For Popper, any good theory that is likely to advance scientific understanding is consequently one that can, in principle, be falsified. Popper likened advances in science to a kind of survival of the fittest of theories, not unlike the process of natural selection in biological evolution.

Popper stressed in his epistemology that scientific research is rooted in problem-solving, as opposed to the positivist model of science

which cliams to be founded in observation. In this way, Popper suggested that theory precedes observation. He also objected to relegating all meaningful statements to two categories: mathematics or experimentally verified facts. Indeed, one of the flaws of logical positivism that led to its eventual abandonment as a formal philosophy arose precisely from the objection that the verification principle was neither a mathematical proposition nor empirically grounded.

It should be pointed out in this context that Popper did not propose his criterion of falsifiability as a truth-criterion in the same manner as the founders of logical positivism had proposed the verification principle. Popper understood that there was much in science that could not be explicitly defined. Popper used the falsifiability criterion or "demarcation criterion," as he called it, to separate genuine science from pseudo-science.[11] He used it, for instance, to demonstrate that Marxism and Freud's psychoanalytical theory could not in principle be falsified, and thus, fell into the pseudo-science category.12 This does not mean that Popper's demarcation criterion undermined a belief in theology or human values, since he applied it only to belief systems that claimed to be scientific such as Marxism or Freud's psychoanalytical theory. Unlike the logical positivists, Popper did not attempt to use a "scientific" criterion of truth as the balance in which all philosophy was to be weighed.

Much of Popper's philosophy has also been directed against the empiricist's reductionism of the human mind into strictly natural processes. Popper, for example, places all phenomena into three "worlds": World 1, contains the material constituents of the universe; World 2, denotes mental categories and subjective knowledge such as feeling and thinking; World 3, represents the category of objective knowledge, such as scientific knowledge, mathematics, art, history. In this latter category, Popper also places theology. Popper has argued that neither World 2 nor World 3 can be reduced down to World 1, as advocated in one form or another by the prevailing empirical school. He states that World 3 in particular is autonomous and has a life of its own.13

Popper's challenge to the empiricist school within the philosophy of mind recently entered a new phase with the publication of *The Self and Its Brain*, a book Popper wrote in collaboration with the neuroscientist John Eccles.[14] Popper and Eccles argue in favor of what has come to be known as traditional "dualism," the view that the mind and body are two distinct but interacting entities. Popper and Eccles

defend the autonomy of the mind, its uniqueness and creativity. In stating that all significant human experience, and particularly scientific knowledge, is based on unique qualities of the mind, Popper is, of course, working within the "rationalist" tradition of Western philosophy. Rationalism gives primacy to the mind in the acquisition of knowledge over, say, information gathered from the senses. The rationalist tradition in the West includes such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant. Popper, as a modern-day rationalist, however, belongs to a minority of professional philosophers. Generally speaking, one of the consequences of the prevailing empirical outlook is that most rationalist philosophers in Western philosophy are not taken seriously. Plato and Aristotle, for instance, are now usually only studied for historical and academic interest. During his talk at the Open Forum in San Francisco in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá contrasted Western philosophy with "philosophers of the East," among whom he included Aristotle and Plato.15 Popper, a modern-day rationalist philosopher who is taken seriously, is an exception.

The philosophy of Thomas Kuhn, also influential in the philosophy of science in this century, sought to remedy the limitations of logical positivism. Kuhn emphasized the cultural character of science. In particular, Kuhn stressed that behind any single theory of science, there is a certain worldview or, as he called it, a "paradigm."[16] Kuhn argued that single theories are rarely tested or falsified on their own. Facts are selected and interpreted according to an underlying worldview present in the minds of scientists at a given time. He believed that progress in science was achieved through the impact of background worldview rather than the successes of individual theories. Kuhn argued that progress in science was achieved through "paradigm shifts" that led to the acquisition of a new worldview. According to Kuhn, most scientists work within orthodox paradigms. There is a period of transition and crisis, however, from one paradigm to another, during which scientists discover a growing number of anomalies with the orthodox worldview and propose new ways of resolving the ensuing contradictions.

Other developments that relate to the philosophy of science in this century have further stressed the social character of science. John Marks, a historian of science, represents the view that science has certain "ethics," without which it cannot develop.[17] He stresses the need for self-critical scientists vis-a-vis their own work and the necessity

for science to be subjected to public criticism. Marks argues that for science to advance these criticisms need to be considered seriously. He also maintains that scientists should be partly autonomous to supervise their own work, so that they can operate under conditions that foster a free flow of information. Marks places particular importance on the correct functioning of the social institutions of science as a precondition to scientific advancement.

The philosophies of science put forward by the founders of logical positivism and by Popper and Kuhn all have the common feature of attempting to describe scientific advances in terms of mechanisms, whether those of the individual scientist or within the scientific community. Against this approach, Paul Feyerabend argued that there could in fact be no comprehensive description of the nature of science and that it is much more productive to practice science than to attempt to describe it.[18]

There are, of course, many other developments in the philosophy of science in the twentieth century. Yet, the negative impact of this opposition to positivism, in terms of changing the underlying empiricist worldview, is not yet clear. Even within other schools of formal philosophy, and despite notable exceptions, a predominantly empirical worldview still prevails. This is true within the philosophy of mind, where the empirical worldview dominates most published literature.[19] It is even truer outside philosophy where science still retains a largely positivist image.

Within the modern philosophy of science, there are still unresolved tensions about the fundamental question: In what sense is science objective? The philosophies of Feyerabend and Kuhn, for instance, are often referred to as "relativist" since they emphasize that science is related to the cultural beliefs and values of society. In contrast, most of the philosophy of science in this century depicts science as being objective, that is, independent of cultural biases. It is especially the international nature of science, beyond class, culture, and country, that is touted as being one of its greatest strengths. Not only scientists, but informed others also have this concept of science: that it uncovers truths about the universe that are independent of the cultural beliefs of the individual scientists.

The opposing voices to the view that scientific knowledge is inherently "relative" usually advocate some form of "pragmatism." They suggest that theories capable of surviving the tests to which they are

subjected are in a sense objective. These theories are universal and transcend cultural and personal biases. Popper's definition of objective knowledge is one of the most clear expressions of the pragmatic approach to scientific truth. His model of objective knowledge emerging out of "the natural selection of hypotheses" expresses the belief mentioned above that scientific theories need to pass some kind of "test" before they can be accepted.[20] Or, more accurately, Popper's position is that they need to pass "refutations." The spirit behind this pragmatic approach is that objective truth must have the resilience to withstand the "tests" to which it is subjected. In other words, it must be successful and stand the test of time.

It must be re-emphasized that most people, particularly those unfamiliar with the reactions to positivism among academics, usually equate objectivity in science with the application of formal methods of procedure, whether as observation, hypothesis, or experiment. The public, including many scientists, usually apply the verification test as the true version of science: propositions that do not relate to mathematics or cannot be empirically verified are somehow less significant. This is particularly true with respect to religion. Science is set apart from religion on the grounds that, unlike religion, it has an objective method. Very few philosophies of science explicitly relate science to religion. It is this view of science that still dominates the modern mind. In this way, empiricism still dominates the modern view of science.

## THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS OF SCIENCE

From the Bahá'í point of view, one cannot understand the nature of science without first understanding human nature. Science is not understood to be based on methodology, but is perceived to be founded on a spiritual faculty of human nature. In this sense, the Baha'i Faith differs from most philosophies of science that separate human nature from scientific investigation, or take for granted the special characteristics of the mind that make science possible. Human nature from the Bahá'í perspective is not reducible to the mere processes of nature. One of humanity's special characteristics, not found within nature, is said to be intellectual capacity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

> [Humanity] is endowed with ideal virtues-for example, intellection, volition, faith, confession and acknowledgement of God-while nature is devoid of all these. The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for

> scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life.21

According to this view science is possible only because human nature is fundamentally different from the world of nature. Human nature is viewed as "conscious intelligence and reflection," characteristics not found elsewhere. 'Abdu'l-Baha states:

> Nature is without the crown of human faculties and attributes. Man possesses conscious intelligence and reflection; nature does not. . . . Man is endowed with volition and memory; nature has neither.22

The Bahá'í conception of science views the capacity for scientific investigation as a singularly human activity. Without the special qualities of conscious intelligence and free will, science would be impossible. The Baha'i view of science thus has much in common with the rationalist tradition within Western philosophy.

From the Baha'i viewpoint, since the character of science essentially derives from supernatural powers of the mind, it is not artificially separated from other creative spheres of human activity. Science is frequently mentioned in the Baha'i writings in the same context as the arts and crafts. Bahá'u'lláh states that the "arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being" and uses the general term "knowledge" to refer to them all.[23] 'Abdu'l-Baha states that one must put effort in striving to acquire "science and the arts."[24] From the Baha'i perspective, since arts and crafts are also founded on the unique creative powers of the mind, they share a natural unity with science. There is no strict boundary between sciences, arts, and crafts in the Baha'i view. All are regarded as important forms of knowledge which Bahá'ís have a spiritual obligation to acquire.

Another important Baha'i concept is one that links science to a reflection of profound cosmological mysteries. The Baha'i view of science is unlike most modern views of science in that it does not separate science from religious mysteries. The Bahá'í writings state that science is a revelation from God. The universe, from the Bahá'í perspective, is perceived to be filled with the knowledge and signs of God. Each atom is said to contain within it profound cosmological mysteries.

The unity and order of the cosmos, a belief which underlies all scientific investigation, is given special emphasis in the Baha'i Faith and is looked upon as an ultimate sign of divine purpose and design. The

Baha'i writings state that the universe is regulated by laws which operate from the atomic to astronomical level. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

> This Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart-to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen insight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart.25

The nature of science is ultimately impossible to capture or describe since this knowledge, embedded within the universe, is regarded as infinite. Human science is viewed, however, as being empowered to capture a portion of this knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh states:

> Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed.26

The Bahá'í conception of science is thus inseparable from a sense of mystery and the belief that science is essentially infinite. In the Bahá'í view, science is founded on such cosmological mysteries as the unity and order of the universe, perceived as signs of God, and on the creative power of the human mind, regarded as the greatest of all signs of God in the universe.

The Baha'i sacred writings perceive science to be unfathomable because the mysteries that it conceals are believed to be likewise unfathomable. Bahá'u'lláh states the rational soul is a "mystery among His mysteries." He states that "every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge. . . . Verily I say, the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries."27

Speaking of the rational faculty, Baha'u'llah states:

> Wert thou to ponder in thine heart, from now until the end that hath no end, and with all the concentrated intelligence and understanding . . . this divinely ordained and subtle Reality, this sign of the revelation of the All-Abiding, All-Glorious God, thou wilt fail to comprehend its mystery or to appraise its virtue.[28]

The very recognition of such a mystery is in itself regarded by Baha'u'llah as the "acme of human understanding":

> This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development.29

The recognition of the essential mystery of the power of the rational faculty-the foundation of scientific investigation-from the Bahá'í point of view is crucial to understanding the nature of science. According to this view, as science makes continued progress, the cosmological truths that make this progress possible confront the enquirer as being increasingly mysterious. Contrary to modern popular positivist conceptions of science, scientific progress is believed to enhance mystery, not to diminish it.

In modern thought, particularly within positivism, wisdom is separated from knowledge. Very few modern philosophies of science recognize the irreducible mystery of human nature to be the "culmination of man's development." The above quotation from Baha'u'llah proclaims that wisdom lies forever beyond the reach of knowledge. By contrast, modern thought, particularly within positivism, displays an overt lack of humility, a loss of wisdom.

From the Baha'i point of view, there is no mechanism in science that one can employ that protects it from error. All human criteria for establishing truth are thought to be ultimately fallible. From this point of view, science is not entirely human. It is guided by God's grace. From the Baha'i perspective, science ultimately advances by the light of the Holy Spirit reflecting in the human mind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared that "without the Holy Spirit he [a scientist] would have no intellect. He would be unable to acquire his scientific knowledge."[30]

The notion that science is objective and impersonal, without reference to the mind, its convictions and values, is not upheld in Baha'i sacred scripture. Bahá'ís believe that the preconditions necessary for

acquiring truth, including scientific truth, lie first in acquiring spiritual characteristics. In the Baha'i view, scientific "facts" are not set in opposition to religious ideals. Unlike the value-neutral conception of science, the Baha'i concept maintains that the ability to acquire knowledge depends upon cultivating certain moral and spiritual prerequisites on the part of the enquirer. One of the most important of these preconditions is the obligation to think for oneself and to rely on one's own reasoning powers.

The spirit of Bahá'í enquiry entails where possible taking responsibility for carrying out one's own investigations and for minimizing the passive absorption of information received from others. Blind imitation of other people's views is perceived as being the main source in the proliferation of prejudices. 'Abdu'l-Baha states:

> Furthermore, know ye that God has created in man the power of reason, whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors. He has endowed him 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. He must not be an imitator or blind follower of any soul. He must not rely implicitly upon the opinion of any man without investigation; nay, each soul must seek intelligently and independently, arriving at a real conclusion and bound only by that reality. The greatest cause of bereavement and disheartening in the world of humanity is ignorance based upon blind imitation.31

As a vital spiritual precondition to acquiring knowledge, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also stresses the importance of having an open mind and of being ready to relearn all that one knows.32 This prerequisite should not be confused with the positivist's notion of being objective in a suspended value-neutral state. The Baha'i concept of being open-minded expresses the spiritual condition of a readiness to revise what one already knows. It does not require neutrality about human values.

An important spiritual prerequisite to the successful practice of science from the Baha'i point of view is the search for truth and the value we place on such a search. In the Bahá'í understanding, truth is both universal and unifying. From this perspective, all truths are ultimately connected and emanate from a single truth. Bahá'u'lláh, quoting an Islamic hadith, states that "knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it."33 Science and religion fmd common ground in their search to discover universal truths. 'Abdu'l-Baha

recommends to enquirers: "Put all your beliefs into harmony with science; there can be no opposition, for truth is one."[34] From the Bahá'í perspective, the universality of certain beliefs, the degree to which they bring a unified vision, are indications of their validity.

The approach to truth within the Baha'i Faith is also pragmatic, one that assesses the validity of a certain theory or belief by its effects. 'Abdu'l-Baha emphasized the technological effects of science as proof of the validity of the scientific concepts underlying them. He constantly referred to the predictive power of science, its ability to understand the past, and its capacity to transform the means of transportation and communication as powerful demonstrations of the laws of nature that scientific investigation helps to reveal.35 In the Bahá'í Faith, the importance of understanding phenomena in terms of the "fruits" they produce is stressed. 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that "for nothing on earth can be demonstrated by words alone, and every level of existence is known by its signs and symbols, and every degree in man's development has its identifying mark."[36] Bahá'u'lláh warns, however, against such sciences that "begin in mere words and end in mere words." He encourages the acquisition of "such arts and sciences, however, as are productive of good results, and bring forth their fruit."[37] In this sense, the more evident the effects (i.e., the more universal and unifying they are), the greater the truth that substantiates them. One might describe this pragmatic test of the universality and unifying effects of beliefs or theories as an implicit truth-criterion of the Baha'i Faith. It is not, however, rigidly applied, stipulating what Bahá'ís can or cannot believe. Objective truths, from the Baha'i perspective, are ones that are universally shared. The objective character of scientific truth is demonstrated, not so much by its possessing an impersonal method, or by rational or philosophical demonstrations, but by the transforming power of its effects, which prove to be universal and unifying.

The Baha'i Faith can only be considered to be "scientific in its method"[38] in terms of its reliance on using one's own unique powers of mind, as opposed to the passive absorption of information. The phrase "scientific in its method" captures an important attitude of mind that characterizes the Baha'i approach: the unique powers of the mind upon which science is founded, its ability for creative abstraction, its truth-seeking nature, its ability to reason, its ability to be independent of social prejudices, its ability to perform courageous leaps of faith-these are viewed as being just as indispensable to the progress of religion as

they are to the progress of science. The Bahá'í has an obligation to use the same creative qualities of mind which underlie scientific investigation in the study of religion. 'Abdu'l-Baha states:

> Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of religion? I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance![39]

Here 'Abdu'l-Baha suggests a truth-criterion for religious beliefs, namely, the extent to which they are in harmony with "reason and science."

In the Bahá'í writings, the socio-spiritual conditions necessary for the advancement of science are described as a reciprocal relationship between science and religion. An often quoted metaphor makes science and religion the two wings of a bird. 'Abdu'l-Baha states that only by maintaining a balance between these two wings of humanity can the bird make progress. Religion without science leads to superstition, while science without religion results in materialism:

> Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try and fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. All religions of the present day have fallen into superstitious practices, out of harmony alike with the true principles of the teaching they represent and with the scientific discoveries of the time.40

From the Bahá'í perspective, religion has two components. The first component consists of eternal spiritual truths that are virtually identical in all the world's great religions. These primary truths typically include exhortations to spiritual detachment, striving to attain a greater measure of love, justice, humility, and other virtues. The second component consists of laws and ordinances relating to social conditions and forms of worship that are relative to time and place. From the Bahá'í perspective, science can perform an important service to religion. It can purify religion by constantly distinguishing religion's primary irreducible truths from its secondary non-essentials. Further, science

can protect religion from literalism vis-a-vis its spiritual beliefs. The well-known example of science's protective function against literalism occurred when scientific investigation demonstrated that the earth's age was far older than the traditional six thousand years which had been calculated by using the genealogies found in the Bible. Referring to the biblical passages upon which this mistaken belief was based, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated: "This [the days of creation] has an inner meaning and significance; it is not to be interpreted literally."[41]

Conversely, religion can direct the fruits of scientific study to moral ends, for religion provides spiritual values by which science can best serve society. From the Baha'i perspective, religion gives science spiritual vision. Shorn of its dogmas, religion is understood to complement science with spiritual meaning. The Bahá'í writings indicate that only when a balance between science and religion is achieved will a lasting and universal peace become possible. 'Abdu'l-Baha states:

> When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles-and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God.42

The Bahá'í principle that science be in harmony with religion encompasses many of the prerequisites set out by the philosophy of science for the advancement of science such as the need for public criticism, the scrutiny of scientists themselves, and the free flow of information. The Baha'i concept of the complementarity of religion and science also advocates that scientists cooperate, not only among themselves, but also for the greater good of society. In the Bahá'í view, science must serve society, for science has far-reaching social consequences from which it cannot be separated. To be valid, science must serve a spiritual purpose. This is quite different from the modern positivist views of science that reflect a value-neutralist frame of mind which requires the scientist to suspend moral commitments. For instance, after having given a discourse on the nature of science, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated:

> How shall we utilize these gifts and expend these bounties? By directing our efforts toward the unification of the human race. We must use these powers in establishing the oneness of the world of humanity. . .[43]

Consequently, from the Baha'i point of view, science cannot be removed from its impact on society. Human beings have a special responsibility to use the creative powers of the mind in the service of humanity. Without this end purpose in mind, developments in science endanger civilization. Bahá'u'lláh warned:

> The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. . If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.44

'Abdu'l-Baha echoes the same theme when he stated:

> Material progress alone does not tend to uplift man. On the contrary, the more he becomes immersed in material progress, the more does his spirituality become obscured. . . only if material progress goes hand in hand with spirituality can any real progress come about.45

In this quotation one finds a vision of progress quite different from the one normally associated with science. From the Bahá'í point of view, real progress must entail a moral dimension or an evolution in values.

The Baha'i approach to science may be summarized by the following quotation from 'Abdu'l-Baha which closely relates science to the service of humanity, the development of human virtues, and the discovery of cosmological mysteries:

> This endowment is the most praiseworthy power of man, for through its employment and exercise the betterment of the human race is accomplished, the development of the virtues of mankind is made possible and the spirit and mysteries of God become manifest.46

## SCIENTISTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

In the Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh states that the main innovators of ancient Greek science and philosophy all acknowledged a belief in God as the "Causer of causes."[47] The same is true, broadly speaking, for the innovators of modern science.

The positivist conception of science only partially captures the nature of scientific investigation. Formal methods of logical reasoning and empirical tests, as attested by some great scientists of the past

and present, only capture the surface layers of science's true nature. Science is built upon spiritual foundations, not just empirical-mathematical ones. Successful science does consist, of course, in a delicate balance between theory and experimentation. Theories need to be tested. But this process cannot be explicitly defined by listing rules of methodology. Science is a multi-layered activity where "facts," "numbers," and experiments only lie at the surface. Certain statements by scientists themselves about the nature of science support the broader Bahá'í concept of science. Only a few examples will be cited here from the many available.

One scientist whose work directly disproved a fundamental tenet of logical positivism was the mathematician Kurt Godel. Logical positivism was based upon the premise that mathematical propositions could be essentially reduced down to chains of deductive logic. This view of mathematics is essentially tautological, consisting of such statements as "All bachelors are men." In 1931, about the same time that logical positivism was being formulated as a formal philosophy, Kurt Godel demonstrated this tautological view of mathematics to be false. Godel demonstrated that there is a natural incompleteness to the entire domain of arithmetic and mathematics, one that involves the creative participation of the mind. Godel demonstrated that arithmetic cannot be reduced down to a single set of axioms.48 He proved that there will always be genuine truths of arithmetic lying outside a given number of logical axioms. The conclusion follows that mathematics is infinitely more creative than a mere tautology. New discoveries in mathematics occur from acts of intuition that cannot be described in a formal way and do not result from logical inferences alone. This discovery contributed significantly to the demise of logical positivism as a formal philosophy. On a more general level, Godel's proof shows that science progresses through creative acts of the mind and that there is much in science which cannot be fully articulated.

Isaac Newton's view of his own lifetime of work in physics reveals that he considered science to be founded on an ocean of spiritual truths:

> I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on a seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than the ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.49

Newton's view of science is characteristic of pre-modern conceptions of science and also anticipates the Baha'i approach. Every scientific advance emerges from an ocean of spiritual truth. Every scientific fact indicates the presence of deeper truths. According to this metaphor, the nature of science is unfathomable. Empirical tests and observations, rational hypotheses, are likened to "pebbles" on the shoreline of scientific truth, whose reality is intuitively believed to extend infinitely beyond them. This metaphor of an "ocean of truth" also appears in the Baha'i writings, in the context of Bahá'u'lláh describing his own Revelation. He states:

> My holy, My divinely ordained Revelation may be likened unto an ocean in whose depths are concealed innumerable pearls of great price, of surpassing luster. . . . This most great, this fathomless and surging Ocean is near, astonishingly near, unto you. Behold it is closer to you than your life-vein![50]

The rational faculty, from the Bahá'í perspective, as in most of the world's great religions, is described as one of the clearest signs of God within. It is the ocean of truth that provides science with spiritual vision and background meaning, without which science would become divided into a series of meaningless measurements and observations. A spiritual vision of truth gives unity and meaning to science.

Another image used within the history of science, particularly by the seventeenth-century pioneers of modern science, was the metaphor of science being the Book of Nature. Here science was likened to the Book of Revelation within religion. From this perspective, the world of nature unfolds through scientific investigation as a story of meaning. Nature is understood in this view to contain its own parables. The book of science is not to be read in a detached manner, but rather should involve the reader in a series of discoveries designed from the very beginning to point the reader's attention to spiritual truth. The turning of each page of the Book of Nature is believed to bring one closer to its Author. The views of the seventeenth-century astronomer Kepler exemplify this perspective. Kepler understood mathematics to be the script from which God had written the Book of Nature, and the ability to decipher this script was a sign that humans were made in God's image. For Kepler, mathematics was God's signature in the Universe.51 Kepler's great success in science, his famous three mathematical laws of planetary motion, were inspired by this spiritual vision.

It is interesting to note that in the Bahá'í sacred writings the world of nature is also likened to a book. Bahá'u'lláh states:

> Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein.52

That the nature of science penetrates far beyond formal procedures of logic and empirical observation was also indicated by Niels Bohr. The revolution of quantum theory in physics necessitated a more profound view of science than the positivist one. Perhaps the greatest philosophical lesson of quantum theory is that absolute objectivity is unattainable in science. By the scientist's mere participation in the experiment, absolute objectivity is impossible to maintain. An observation will always be to some degree uncertain because of the influence of the subject on the object. The more the subject shares with the object, the greater the uncertainty. Niels Bohr states that under such circumstances we can only make progress in terms of "images and parables":

> Quantum theory thus provides us with a striking illustration of the fact that we can fully understand a connection though we can only speak of it in images and parables. In this case, the images and parables are by and large the classical concepts, i.e., "wave" and "corpuscle." They do not fully describe the real world and are, moreover, complementary in part, and hence contradictory. For all that, since we can only describe natural phenomena with our everyday language, we can only hope to grasp the real facts by means of these images. This is probably true of all general philosophical problems and particularly of metaphysics. We are forced to speak in images and parables which do not express precisely what we mean. Nor can we avoid occasional contradictions; nevertheless, the images help us draw nearer to the real facts. Their existence no one should deny. "Truth dwells in the deeps."53

In this quotation, Bohr describes characteristics of scientific investigation. He expresses the belief that scientific investigation contains more than can be expressed in explicit formal terms: "truth dwells in the deeps." This is a vision of science which understands human knowledge to capture only imperfect glimpses of the reality of the universe, a vision that has obvious parallels to religion. The contradictions of quantum mechanics, which states that light is in certain

circumstances composed of waves and in other circumstances of particles, are not unlike the paradoxes of religion. The study of human nature or of God will be associated with inevitable paradoxes since, like Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, human beings cannot be totally objective about such questions since they are inherent to the mystery they describe.

From this perspective, science and religion might be represented as two aspects of one reality. What we understand of this reality will depend on how we seek to understand it. Niels Bohr, referring to the ban which positivist philosophy would place on scientific investigation, stated: "This ban would prevent our understanding of quantum theory."[54] A positivist's concept of science has often been used to assess negatively the claims of religion. The logical positivists used the verification principle to dismiss the greater part of ethics and theology. Yet, from the perspective of such eminent scientists as Niels Bohr, positivist science is an inadequate guide to understanding science itself, let alone being capable of providing answers to the cosmological questions of religion.

Max Planck is another founder of quantum theory worthy of mention in this context. This great physicist affirmed that science is founded on a search for the "absolute," and that the measure of every scientific theory could be known by applying the biblical criterion of "By their fruits ye shall know them":

> I emphasized that I had always looked upon the search for the absolute as the noblest and most worth while task of science. . . . These absolute values in science and ethics are the ones whose pursuit constitutes the true task of every intellectually alert and active human being . . . there is an infallible, time-honored measure, a phrase which pronounces the final authoritative judgement for all times; By their fruits ye shall know them![55]

Elsewhere, Planck stated God to be the final goal to which all scientific research was moving, and wrote that religion and science "mutually supplement" one another:

> The natural scientist recognizes as immediately given nothing but the content of his sense experiences and of the measurements based on them. He starts from this point, on a road of inductive research, to approach as best as he can the supreme and eternally unattainable goal of his quest—God and His world order. Therefore, while both religion and natural science require a belief in God for their activities, to the former He is the

> starting point, to the latter the goal of every thought process. To the former He is the foundation, to the latter the crown of the edifice of every generalized worldview. . . . Religion and natural science do not exclude each other, as many contemporaries of ours believe or fear; they mutually supplement and condition each other.56

The Bahá'í Faith affirms, moroever, that science is founded on an intuition of unity in the universe. It is an intuition that is inextricably tied to a conviction of the rationality of the cosmos, a rationality which cannot be completely demonstrated to be true. The rationality of the universe requires faith. One can always be skeptical about such a faith, as Hume's philosophy clearly showed.57 Hume started out to arrive at a strictly empirical description of human nature, and ended by doubting the validity of science itself. A purely empirical approach to science will always be "blind" to the laws of nature which meaningfully connect the different sense-perceptions of experience. Hume found, for instance, that he could doubt fundamental beliefs upon which science was built such as the law of causality and the separate existence of the universe being external to the mind. It is clear that the primary intuitions upon which all scientific investigation is made require a leap of faith.

All great advances in the history of science have brought our vision of the universe into a greater unity. This was demonstrated in ancient Greece, where the Ionian philosophers looked for the "One behind the Many," or in the science of Pythagoras by his discovery of an equivalency principle between musical intervals and the numerical ratios of the length of a cord of a musical instrument. This discovery led Pythagoras to believe that science discovers the underlying harmony of the universe, the "music of the spheres." Such a vision of unity is also evident in Newton's physics when he demonstrated that the same laws of motion that applied to projectiles on the surface of the earth also regulated planetary motion. The trajectory of a falling apple on earth and the trajectory of the moon were united together. Similarly in the mid-nineteenth century, James Clerk Maxwell showed that the electric and magnetic forces were in fact one single force-the electromagnetic force. The equivalency principles discovered by Einstein also brought a vision of the universe into greater unity; that of the unity between energy and mass or the unity between inertial acceleration and gravitational force. A search for unity in the universe also continues to motivate research in physics today, through

its goal of uniting the fundamental forces of nature into a single "unified field theory." The character of modern physics has much in common with the Baha'i description of the universe as one organic whole that has hidden connections, both material and spiritual.58

These discoveries in the history of science serve to demonstrate the same point that progress in science advances by integrating the vision of the universe into a wider scheme of unity. In The Seven Valleys (*Haft vádí*), Bahá'u'lláh describes the different stages of development that an individual must traverse in the search for God. He describes the Valley of Unity as the natural culmination of the Valley of Knowledge. Within the Valley of Knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh states that "in the ocean he findeth a drop, in a drop he beholdeth the secrets of the sea," and quotes a traditional Islamic verse which states: "Split the atom's heart and lo! Within it thou wilt find a Sun."[59] Modern physics is doing precisely this.

Scientific investigation is founded upon the conviction that the universe is intelligible. Einstein, for instance, stated a view similar to that of the Baha'i Faith when he affirmed that science is founded on the great mysteries of the mind: "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."[60] The spirit of science is characterized by a search for universal truths, and science is based upon the value one places upon such a search. Scientific investigation entails the search for an ever-deeper meaning in the universe. Thus, science is founded upon spiritual values, a search for meaning, a faith in the rationality and unity of the universe, and the search to acquire universal truths. Einstein expressed these spiritual characteristics in the following way:

> But science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration towards truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion. To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. The situation may be expressed by an image: Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.61

Elsewhere, speaking against the prevailing empiricist mood of modern philosophy, Einstein noted that a "fear of metaphysics" has come to be the "malady of contemporary empiricistic philosophizing."62

Both science and religion also require the precondition of reverence. Science requires respect by the subject for the object under study and an obligation to purge oneself of egocentric prejudices. Religion likewise also requires reverence. The scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi stated: "We need reverence to perceive greatness, even as we need a telescope to observe spiritual nebulae."[63] The many works of Polanyi in the area of the philosophy of science emphasize the irreducible role of faith or truth in the process of scientific investigation.[64] Polanyi's philosophy of science represents one of the more significant attempts to understand the nature of science in this century. The objections to positivism, normally associated with Kuhn and Feyerabend, are all anticipated in Polanyi's works.[65] But Polanyi's philosophy of science goes beyond most other descriptions of science by demonstrating that science is furthered by a community of enquirers who follow self-imposed transcendent obligations in their interest to uncover objective truths. He shows that commitments to truth and meaning are an essential part of a scientist's faith. Polanyi argues that the positivist's notion of objectivity in science is a disguised form of nihilism and a form of "intellectual subterfuge."@ He characterizes the modern notion that science somehow reveals the universe to be without purpose as a "modern myth." Polyani states that such positivist notions of science "are the stoppages in our ears that we must pull out if we are ever once more to experience the full range of meanings possible to man."[67]

Universal truths cannot be compartmentalized. The scientist who genuinely searches for universal truths will become attracted to the universe of religion. Correspondingly, a sincere member of a religious faith cannot avoid having an interest in scientific investigation. Isaac Newton, for instance, spent more time on theology than he did on science. Frank Manuel, a biographer of Newton's life, commenting on the great legacy of papers left behind by Newton, amounting to millions of words, stated: "There is far more about God than man in these papers."[68] Newton wrote scores of papers and commentaries on biblical subjects, which, for the most part, were unpublished during his lifetime, and are even now still being properly organized and catalogued.

Newton's work on biblical prophecy is generally not thought to be significant. From the Bahá'í perspective, however, Newton's theological efforts were not fruitless, and in some respects, they bear close resemblance to Bahá'í interpretation of scripture. In his

"Observations Upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St John," first published in 1733, Newton shows how the prophecies of Daniel correctly predicted the first coming of Christ, and goes on to examine the prophecies relating to the second coming. Newton, however, explicitly refrains from interpreting the prophecies of Daniel which relate to Christ's second coming, stating that "this part of the Prophecy being therefore not yet fulfilled, I shall not attempt a particular interpretation of it."[69] Newton did not think it wise to emphasize the date of a biblical prophecy before its occurrence. He also believed that only well after the prophesied event had taken place would it be possible to recognize the validity of the prophecy. There are, moreover, indications that Newton believed himself to be living on the eve of the fulfillment of the times. He stated: "I seem to gather that God is about opening these mysteries."[70] These words of Newton were written in the eighteenth century, the century immediately preceding the one that witnessed the rise of the Baha'i revelation. Newton's statement is basically in accord with the Baha'i writings, which state that the fulfillment of the second coming of Christ prophesied in biblical scripture came with the birth of the Baha'i Revelation in 1844.71

Newton also shares something in common with the Bahá'í approach in his secret Unitarianism. In this respect, he differed significantly from his contemporaries. In his private manuscripts, he attempted to show that the doctrine of the Trinity lacked prophetic authority. He supported his belief in the unity of God with both theological and historical evidence. One suspects that the unity of God underlying Newton's theology was not unrelated to his conviction in the unity of nature, which lay at the foundation of his science. Newton also spent much of his time on alchemy and studying ancient Greek literature.

The work of Einstein also has many areas of agreement with Baha'i teachings and demonstrates the close association of science and religion within the mind of this scientific genius. Einstein understood science to be founded on the search to uncover universal truths. Perhaps what is less well-known is that Einstein was a strong advocate of world government and very much concerned with universal peace. Einstein wrote hundreds of letters to universities, governmental organizations, and social groups, proposing that the only way to end war and to obtain universal peace was to create a supra-national organization that would have at its disposal an international army capable of enforcing its decisions and a world court

which could bindingly adjudicate international disputes. In an open letter to the United Nations written in 1947, Einstein suggested that the United Nations function as an interim institution in a move toward world federal government.72 He also suggested a series of changes to the same body to help prepare it for this task. His views on this subject bear remarkable similarity to Baha'i teachings on the New World Order.73

From the Baha'i point of view, the nature of science is not so much understood with reference to a philosophy of science, but in relation to the universality of its effects and its transforming power. With this perspective in mind, it is clear that the lives and words of those scientists who have greatly contributed to the advancement of science are a more accurate guide to the nature of science than the philosophers' concept of science. The same qualities of mind that distinguished Newton and Einstein in science were also present in many of their other activities. The same courageous commitment to truth, the same faith in unity which was foundational to their success in physics, were applied in Newton's case to theology and in Einstein's to peace issues. The words and lives of Newton and Einstein affirm the Baha'i concept of science being ultimately grounded on spiritual foundations. It is perhaps no accident that, generally speaking, over the last four hundred years, those who have advocated an empirical view of science, such as Hume and Russell, have been philosophers, while those who have described science in terms of the spiritual mysteries underlying nature and the mind were scientists such as Kepler, Newton, and Einstein. Within the mind of certain scientific geniuses, science is not artificially separated from religion. When one possesses a vision of unity and a belief that ultimately all truths are one, the modern barriers between science and religion, between science and art, between fact and values, disappear.

Both science and religion require a feeling of child-like humility, of child-like trust. Newton pictured himself as a boy playing on the shore of truth, while in the Bible it is stated that only those who become as little children are able to enter the kingdom of heaven.74

## NOTES

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 361.

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Anchor Books, 1966) p. 30.

3. See, for instance, Alfred Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 1971).

4. Ibid., pp. 9–10.

5. R. Carnap quoted in A. J. Ayer, *Logical Positivism (New* York The Free Press, 1959) p. 145.

6. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic,* pp. 9–10.

7. Ibid.

8. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) Sec. 7:3.

9. Bryan Magee, *Modern British Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 77.

10. Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972) p. 258.

11. See, for instance, *A Pocket Popper,* edited by D. Miller (London: Fontana Press, 1983) pp. 118–30.

12. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* 5th ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) p. 108.

13. Popper, *Objective Knowledge,* p. 161.

14. Popper and Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain* (Springer, NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977). See especially Chapter 1 for experience being divided into Worlds 1, 2 and 3, and Chapter 3 for a critique of various forms of materialism within the philosophy of science debate.

15. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p. 356.

16. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970) pp. 10-11.

17. John Marks, *Science and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Heinmann, London, 1983) pp. 363-66.

18. See Feyerabend in A. F. Chalmers, *What is This Thing Called Science?* (Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press, 1982) pp. 13435.

19. See, for instance, D. M. Rosenthal's 600-page *The Nature of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) which contains selections from recent writings in the philosophy of mind. A dualist picture of the mind is covered briefly in 30 pages, largely in a historical perspective, while the rest of the book is devoted to essays that for the most part model the mind on phenomena of biological and artifical intelligence such as computers, robots, and networks. Most of the essays describe the mind from an empiricist perspective.

20. Popper, *Objective Knowledge,* p. 261

21. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p. 51.

22. Ibid.

23. Baha'u'llah, *The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh: A Compilation* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986) p. 316.

*24, Promulgationof Universal Peace,* p. 50.

25. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) p. 3.

26. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings From the Writings of Baha'u'lldh,* trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) pp. 176-77.

27. Ibid., p. 160.

28. Ibid., pp. 164-65.

29. Ibid., p. 165.

30. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) p. 59.

*31. Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p. 291.

*32. Paris Talks,* p. 137.

*33. Writings of Baha'u'lldh,* p. 11.

*34. Paris Talks,* p. 146.

*35. Promulgation of Universal Peace,* pp. 30, 50.

36. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization,* trans. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) p. 99.

*37. Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 313.

38. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1955) p. 7.

*39. Paris Talks,* p. 144.

40. Ibid., p. 143.

41. *Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p. 463.

*42. Paris Talks,* p. 146.

*43. Promulgationof Universal Peace,* p. 51.

*44. Gleanings,* pp. 34142.

*45. Paris Talks,* p. 107.

*46. Promulgationof Universal Peace,* p. 31.

*47. Writings of Baha'u'llah,* p. 243.

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49. Isaac Newton quoted in Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1971) pp. 207-8.

*50. Gleanings,* p. 325.

51. Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1964) p. 268.

*52. Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 24.

53. Niels Bohr quoted in Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond,* p. 210.

54. The reference is actually from Heisenberg recollecting what Bohr said, *Physics and Beyond,* p. 208.

55. Max Planck quoted in John Eccles, *The Human Psyche* (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 218.

56. Ibid., pp. 24647.

57. See David Hume, A *Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

58. See Anjam Khursheed, *Science and Religion. Towards the Restoration of an Ancient Harmony* (London: OneWorld Publications, 1987) pp. 108–20.

59. *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 6.

60. G. Holton and Y. Elkana, *Albert Einstein* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982) p. 242.

61. Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Citadel Press, 1956) p. 26.

62. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973) p. 24.

63. Michael Polayni, *The Study of Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958) p. 96.

64. See, for example, Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), Chapters 8-10.

65. See, for example, Polanyi's *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), where he argues convincingly that science cannot be adequately described by methodology alone or by "refutations." He demonstrates that there will always be an irreducible residue of personal judgment.

66. M. Polyani and H. Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975) p. 56.

67. Ibid., p. 181.

68. F. E. Manuel, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton (New* York: Da Capo, 1968) p. 6.

69. Sir William Whitla, *Sir Isaac Newton's Daniel and the Apocalypse* (London: John Murray, 1922) p. 228.

70. Manuel, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton,* p. 367.

71. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 36-44.

72. Otto Nathan and Heinz Norden, *Einstein on Peace* (New York: Avenel Books, 1981) pp. 44043.

*73. See* J. Tyson, *World Peace and World Government* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986).

74. John 3: l-10.

# INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH: SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

*Seena Fazel*

Anyone who begins an interreligious conversation with the pronouncement of a common sharing of beliefs and values among the world's religions, one that is merely masked by superficial semantical differences, has done precisely that-only made a beginning. Such declarations of commonality, although they contain a grain of truth, can be maintained only at a superficial level. They start to lose meaning as one goes deeper into the inner landscape, the experience, beliefs and practices of the different religious traditions. Paul Knitter, a prominent dialogue theologian, likens dialogue to the situation of a newly married couple beginning to grow out of the infatuation that brought them together. As they begin to experience the daily tests and trials of living and working as partners, as they get to know one another better, they soon arrive at the existential realization of how bewilderingly different they are. Like the young couple experiencing the harsh light of real living for the first time, Knitter observes that the contemporary challenge in interreligious dialogue is to reconcile differences:

> . . . one might still believe that Ultimate Reality or God is one and that ultimately differences will be swallowed into oneness; but right now, in the dust and dirt of the real world, we have to deal with the manyness,

> the differences, among the religions before we can ever contemplate, much less realize, their possible unity or oneness.1

*Dialogue* is a term used to describe a great variety of interfaith relations. Generally, it involves a collective process or a conversation, a two-way communication or a reciprocal relationship in which two or more parties holding significantly different beliefs endeavor to express accurately to dialogue partners what they mean and to learn from each other in the process. But dialogue is more than just an exchange of views and has come to mean a personal process of refining the beliefs and values of one's own faith vis-a-vis the insights that one has gleaned from others.

Three goals of dialogue are succinctly summarized by Leonard Swidler, a Catholic professor of interreligious dialogue: (1) to know oneself more profoundly, just as one learns more about one's native land as a result of living abroad; (2) to know the other ever more authentically; and (3) to live ever more fully, a process described as "mutual transformation."[2] Furthermore, John Cobb, a liberal Protestant scholar of interreligious dialogue, reflects the academic consensus when he states that "a sharp distinction is made between dialogue and evangelistic witness." While the latter aims at conversion, the former does not. The goal is rather mutual understanding, appreciation, and transformation.3

This paper will explore the Baha'i imperative to foster dialogue. Questions arise along the way. Why, for example, should Bahá'ís involve themselves in inter-religious dialogue? What does dialogue have to offer to the development of the Baha'i community? What challenges will Bahá'ís face in the process? The focus in answering these questions will not be historical, but rather will center on the theory and practice of dialogue as depicted in the Bahá'í sacred writings and how it correlates to contemporary scholarship in the field.

## Six Forms of Dialogue

Broadly defined, there are six ways that people engage in dialogue: parliamentary dialogue, institutional dialogue, theological dialogue, dialogue in community, spiritual dialogue, and inner dialogue. A brief description of each will illustrate their distinctive features and the interplay between them.

***Parliamentary dialogue*** refers to large assemblies created for interfaith discussion, such as those organized by the World Conference on Religion and Peace and the British-based World Congress of Faiths. The impetus to engage in interreligious dialogue in this century is arguably the result of the first-ever parliamentary dialogue, the 1893 World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. Such sizeable international gatherings do not lend themselves to a tightly focused agenda, but tend to explore broader concerns, such as the possibilities for better cooperation between religions, and global issues such as peace, poverty, and the environment. They also serve as an important symbol of the strength and vitality of the interfaith movement.

***Institutional dialogue*** includes the organized efforts of particular religious institutions that aim at initiating and facilitating various kinds of dialogue. This type of dialogue also seeks to establish and nurture channels of communication between the institutional bases of religious communities. The World Council of Churches and the Vatican have been active in this area. Numerous variations of this form of dialogue exist on a local level.

***Theological dialogue*** refers to the process of representatives from different religious communities discussing theological and philosophical issues in a structured format. Christians and Muslims may, for example, concentrate their respective understandings on such realities as their prophet-founders, their sacred scriptures, moral values, and the role of religion in society. Academics in particular have pioneered this type of dialogue.

***Dialogue in community*** is a term that encompasses the unstructured interaction between people of different religions. "Most interreligious dialogue takes place in markets and on street corners, at times of festivals or holy days, in the course of civic or humanitarian projects, at times of community or family crisis."[4] Importantly, it also includes cooperative social projects organized by religious groups in response to local problems and practical concerns.

***Spiritual dialogue*** is concerned with deepening spiritual life through interfaith encounter. This type of dialogue does not struggle with theological problems between religious communities, but rather, focuses on shared experience as a means of developing spirituality.

Examples of this are participation in joint worship experiences, and the common celebration of religious festivals and World Religion Day by different faiths.

***Inner dialogue*** takes place within each individual as religious perspectives change on encountering other faiths. This is "the dialogue that takes place in our minds and hearts when we read the Bhagavad Gita, when we meet a Buddhist monk or nun, when we hear the Muslim call to prayer, or when we share the Sabbath meal with Jewish friends"5

## The Dialogical Imperative

There are a number of Bahá'í scriptural passages that bear on interreligious dialogue. In his Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i Aqdas, Baha'u'llah enjoins his followers to "Consort [Arabic: *'áshirú*] ye then with the followers of all religions," and restates later in that book the command to "Consort with all religions with amity and concord."[6] This call is reiterated on three occasions after the revelation of the Aqdas in a similar vein: "Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."7 The original Arabic for "consort" is most probably an imperative form of the verb *'áshara.* Arabic-English lexicons suggest that the word used in this form implies "to be on intimate terms, associate (closely)"[8] with someone, and is indicative of intimate social intercourse and fellowship.[9] This term has the implication of close, intimate association and fellowship, as, for example, the members of the same clan would have had in ancient Arabia.10 The root of *'áshara* is the triliteral *'ashr,* which is the basis of the quranic term *'Ashirah.*[11] *'Ashirah* appears three times in the Qur'an translated as *clan* in the context of one's immediate family: "your brothers, your wives, your *clan*" (9:24); "warn thy *clan,* thy nearest kin" (26:214); "or their brothers, or their *clan"* (58:22).

Bahá'u'lláh's call to the peoples of the world to promote unity and concord contains some explicit injunctions to dialogue. He states that his revelation is centered on the promotion of the unity of humankind: "The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men."[12] In the same tablet, Bahá'u'lláh expresses the desire that religious leaders of

the world "take counsel together" in order to implement whatever measures are necessary to advance the cause of unity:

> Our hope is that the world's religious leaders and the rulers thereof will unitedly arise for the reformation of this age and the rehabilitation of its fortunes. Let them, after meditating on its needs, take counsel together and, through anxious and full deliberation, administer to a diseased and sorely-afflicted world the remedy it requireth.[13]

In another tablet, he calls the conflicting peoples of the world to "gather ye together" so that differences may be explored and resolved:

> 0 contending peoples and kindreds of the earth! Set your faces towards unity, and let the radiance of its light shine upon you. Gather ye together, and for the sake of God resolve to root out whatever is the source of contention amongst you.[14]

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh commands the "men of wisdom among nations" to "fix your gaze upon unity."[15] Thus, Bahá'í sacred scripture presents us with a series of statements that appeal to leaders of both secular and religious thought to consult on the challenges of and prospects for promoting unity. Bahá'u'lláh's plan for the unity of humankind, elaborated throughout his writings, calls for a range of approaches from institutional and theological dialogue to the practical implementation of such consultations through dialogue in community.

Further endorsement for the importance of dialogue comes from 'Abdu'l-Baha's talks. While in North America in 1912, he stressed in a number of talks in churches the need for theological dialogue: "We must investigate reality"; "all of you must strive with heart and soul in order that enmity may disappear entirely" and "seek the means by which the benefits of agreement and concord may be enjoyed"; "the religionists of the world must lay aside imitations and investigate the essential foundation of reality itself. This is the divine means of agreement and unification."[16] 'Abdu'l-Bahá also encouraged spiritual dialogue: "All must abandon prejudices and must even go into each other's churches and mosques, for, in all of these worshipping places, the Name of God is mentioned. Since all gather to worship God, what difference is there?"[17]

## Five Contributions of Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue would appear to be emphasized in the Baha'i writings for at least five major reasons:

***Bahá'í Education and Scholarship:*** Dialogue can serve as a tool for Baha'is to understand more fully the meaning of Baha'i scripture or, as Baha'is put it, to "deepen" in the sacred writings of the Baha'i Faith. Knowledge of the teachings and scriptures of other religions can aid in the understanding of the Baha'i writings, which are infused with the religious symbolism and imagery of other revelations. This principle is most obviously exemplified in the case of Islam, the study of which can enable Bahá'ís to learn more about the theological background and terminology of their own religion. This may be viewed as being analogous to the significant impact of Jewish studies on modern Christian scholarship.[18] Thus, Shoghi Effendi suggests that the Qur'an is an "indispensable" tool for the understanding of Baha'i scripture:

> The knowledge of this revealed holy Book [the Qur'an] is, indeed, indispensable to every Bahá'í who wishes to adequately understand the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.[19]

It is interesting that Shoghi Effendi broadens this approach when responding to a question of a young Baha'i, in which he recommends an "intensive study" of the Kitab-i Íqán (Book of Certitude) and *Some Answered Questions.* He ends the letter by encouraging study of the best contemporary religious scholarship in order "to clarify" these Bahá'í texts:

> It is well, too, to read contemporary books, selecting the best, dealing with the same subjects, in order to become thoroughly acquainted with the subject and be able to clarify the Bahá'í teachings.20

Theological dialogue is a means to the same end of becoming "thoroughly acquainted" with the best contemporary religious thinking in order to "clarify the Bahá'í teachings." Moreover, dialogue can provide the setting to uncover the universal qualities, the ability of Bahá'í scripture to speak through their time and intended recipient to all time.

Further to being a tool for education and insight, dialogue serves to motivate people to challenge their present understanding of their

religion. Swidler describes that by acting as a "mirror" for a religious community, participants are provoked into rethinking: "Our dialogue partner . . . becomes for us something of a mirror in which we perceive our selves in ways we could not otherwise do."[21] This mirror effect occurs because, through dialogue, the participants are provided with a reflection of how others see them. Since dialogue also raises many questions in the process, it focuses the minds of the participants on aspects of their religious teachings that need to be worked out and further clarified.

Another important challenge facing the Baha'i community is its approach to religious pluralism. There is a desperate need for Bahá'ís to produce adequate literature that explores the Bahá'í approach to the major religions.22 The scarce material that exists has been written with Protestant Christianity and Shí'í Islam in mind.23 Little has been written to clarify the Bahá'í teachings in light of modern views of world theology and religious pluralism.

I would maintain that a comprehensive Baha'i theology of other religions can only be worked out in the context of dialogue. Dialogue acts as a theological tool and method to explore the relationship of the Baha'i Faith to other religions. Discussing the importance of the dialogue methodology, Leonard Swidler believes that there will be "no systematic reflection, including Christian theology, [that] can appropriately be done today outside this matrix of interreligious, interideological dialogue."[24] In light of this statement, Bahá'í scholars need to dialogue in order to develop a Baha'i theology of other religions.

**The Transformation of Other Religions:** Dialogue can act as a tool in fulfilling the preeminent aim of the Baha'i Faith-the transformation of the world religions so their sequence, interdependence, wholeness, and unity can be realized. Shoghi Effendi has written that " its avowed, its unalterable purpose" lies in its relation to other religions—"to widen their basis, . . . to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings."25 In a related passage, Shoghi Effendi states: "Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clear apprehension of its purpose."[26]

Instructive in working towards this goal are two examples of dialogue that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as leader of the Baha'i Faith, had with religious leaders in the West. Both these encounters pursue this

challenging theme of the transformation of other religions. The first took place in May 1912 in the United States with Rabbi Stephen Wise, a prominent Jewish theologian of the day. The description of this encounter suggests that the rabbi was impressed by 'Abdu'l-Baha's message: "Indeed, indeed you are one of the greatest logicians of the world. Up to this time I have been talking to you as a man; now I will address you as a Rabbi."[27] 'Abdu'l-Baha's approach in this interview was to champion the cause of Christ and, in so doing, to challenge Jews to reconcile their differences with Christians. His tribute to Christ is itself notable:

> All the great prophets, the kings and the worthies of the Israelitish nation could not make the Persians believe in Moses. All the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nehemiah, et al., could not make one Zoroastrian believe in Moses. But one Jew came and many millions believe in Him. He spread His name in the East and in the West. He caused the Bible to be translated in all the languages of the world, and today nearly every home contains a Bible. He demonstrated throughout the world to all the nations of the world that the Israelitish people were the chosen people, that the Israelitish prophets were the prophets of God, that their books were the books of God, that their words were the words of God.[28]

'Abdu'l-Baha pursued this approach in various addresses to Jewish audiences in his tour of North America. When addressing a vast congregation of two-thousand Jews in San Francisco in 1912,[29] 'Abdu'l-Baha challenged the audience to widen the basis of their faith and accept Jesus Christ as the Word of God: "Why do you not say that Christ was the Word of God? Why do you not speak these words that will do away with all this difficulty?" In Washington D.C., he similarly stated to another Jewish audience, "And now it is time for the Jews to declare that Christ was the Word of God and then this enmity between the two great religions will pass away."[30]

Another interreligious encounter was with a group of Protestant theologians and priests in Paris in February 1913. Here the emphasis was on christology, and 'Abdu'l-Baha presented an interpretation of the Prologue of St John's Gospel which celebrates the uniqueness of Christ without recourse to exclusivism. He then developed the theme that religions have essential and non-essential parts, consigning the dogmas (including the doctrine of the Trinity) and rituals of the Church to the non-essentials. He suggests that many of these non-essentials have been at the root of religious strife and conflict. The

stage is then set for a renewal of the essentials, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues his discourse by highlighting principles foundational for a theology of peace between the religions.[31] Of interest in this encounter is the link made between religious differences and world peace.

Specialists in the field have argued that the process of transforming other religions is central to the goal of dialogue. Paul Griffiths, a professor of the philosophy of religions at the University of Chicago, uses the term "positive apologetics" to describe a process by which dialogue participants "relate themselves apologetically to claims made by their opposite numbers within other religious communities."[32] He argues that apologetics "is an essential component of interreligious relations," and a task that needs to be undertaken by "representative intellectuals" from religious communities.33 Griffiths believes that without apologetics, dialogue is "pallid, platitudinous, and degutted."[34] Other writers in the field have written that the purpose of dialogue is the transformation of the religions. Cobb has written: "The transformation of the other traditions ranks higher as a goal than their supersession."[35] Knitter suggests that the aim of interreligious dialogue is for the dialogue partners to have "their lives to be touched and transformed as ours have been."[36] However, the transformation is reciprocal: "We must say that in dialogue, and beyond dialogue, Christians seek to be transformed and to transform others through mutual witness."37 Indeed, Knitter has argued that the world religions cannot assume their full meaning without this process:

> . . the Christian doctrine of the trinity *needs* the Islamic insistence on divine oneness; the impersonal Emptiness of Buddhism needs the Christian experience of the divine Thou; the Christian teaching on the distinction between the ultimate and the finite needs the Hindu insight into the nonduality between Brahma and atman; the prophetic-praxis oriented content of the Judeo-Christian tradition needs the Eastern stress in personal contemplation and "acting without seeking the fruits of action."[38]

This sort of analysis can be extended to the Baha'i Faith. One can argue that the Baha'i Faith can only assume a fuller meaning when the Baha'i teachings and practice are allowed to benefit, for example, from the metaphysical insights of Buddhism, the devotional practices of Hinduism, the Christian emphasis on the prophet-founder as mediator and savior, the Islamic stress on the sanctity of divine laws, and the importance of communal religiosity in Jewish life.

**The Transformation of the Bahá'í Faith: As** was noted above, reciprocity-the challenge to mutual transformation and change-is integral to dialogue. Hans Küng has argued that interreligious dialogue "calls for self-criticism and self-correction on all sides," and a "reform of ourselves," if the- world religions are to seriously construct a theology of peace.[39] Baha'is naturally are not immune from the need for self-renewal.

One potential area for the transformational effect of dialogue on Baha'i theology and practice lies in the Bahá'í concept of religion. Moojan Momen, a leading Baha'i historian, has argued that Baha'is have constructed a version of the Baha'i Faith that is based on Western concepts of what religion should be. "Thus, in their presentations Baha'is emphasize the concepts of God, the prophet or messenger of God, the revelation of a Holy Book, the establishment of a sacred law, etc."[40] Although this is understandable in view of the historical background and development of the Baha'i Faith, it has perpetuated a somewhat narrow vision of religion and has consequently seriously limited the potential of the Bahá'í Faith to be relevant to non-Western societies. To overcome this problem, the Baha'i community needs to familiarize itself with and, where compatibility is feasible, adapt itself to the worldviews of non-Western peoples. This vital process of broadening the basis of the Baha'i Faith can be undertaken by inter-religious dialogue.

**The Bahá'í Peace Program:** Inter-religious dialogue is integral to the process of developing a framework that will allow for the sustainable development of world peace. Bahá'u'lláh has stated that the "essence of the Faith of God" is to prevent religious strife-an important goal of dialogue:

> That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief, should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion.41

*The Promise of World Peace,* a Baha'i peace charter, calls religious leaders to dialogue in order to remove the causes of religious strife by raising a challenging question: "How are the differences between them [the world's religions] to be resolved in theory and in practice?" The Universal House of Justice suggests a partial response to its own question indicating that theological differences will have to be submerged in a spirit that "will enable them to work together for the advancement of human understanding and peace."[42] The same exhortation was

extended to the Bahá'í community by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who challenged Bahá'ís and others to act as a "propelling agent"[43] to overcome obstacles to world peace.

The importance of the contribution of the world religions to the peace process has been highlighted by a number of theologians. Knitter has written: "Peace . . . is becoming a universal religious symbol that challenges and calls together all religions."[44] Hans Kiing has argued for the central role of interreligious dialogue in current international affairs and that the only alternative to dialogue is continuing international instability and warfare.45 In the quest to tackle peace issues practically, religionists will realize that the problems afflicting humanity cannot be resolved without a new world vision and understanding of humankind and its future, a vision and understanding that can be found in the worlds great religions. Standing together on the common ground of the desire for peace, the religions can help construct a more fruitful dialogue than they have previously experienced.

Küng's call for a theology of peace to be constructed by interreligious dialogue should not be confused with "an abstract, appellative theology of peace of the kind that is so often preached in Rome and Geneva." Calls to passive theologies of peace are ineffectual since general appeals to understanding, tolerance, and peace do not stress commitment: ". . . so it remains voluntary, harmless and inefficient." Rather, Kiing argues that "this theology of peace must be convincing by its concreteness."46

Douglas Martin's challenging presentation to the fortieth anniversary gathering of the World Congress of Faiths addresses this need for a creative and concrete theology of peace. It proposes a disinterested study of the Bahá'í community as a model for the realization of the goals of the Congress of Faiths and the wider dialogue movement. The Bahá'í model can well serve as a unique focus for an interreligious dialogue on peace:

> The model is a global community which, far from seeing itself as already complete or self-sufficient, is embarked on an infinite series of experiments at the local, national, and international levels in its efforts to realize the vision of mankind's oneness which it finds in the Writings of its Founder and of all the Messengers of God. . . . No matter how restricted in size or still restricted in influence the model may be, such a phenomenon deserves the most able and the most disinterested study mankind can bring to it.47

There are two distinct advantages in furthering cooperative social action between the religions as part of the peace process. The first is a *moral* reason: the need for world peace and the alleviation of the suffering of the victims of war is a universal concern of all religious communities, and it therefore provides a common ground for all religions to participate in dialogue. Every religion will feel the obligation to respond. The second advantage is *practical* and indirect: the process of solving practical problems together will eventually spill over into discussing the theological issues among the religions. This "hermeneutical method" that facilitates dialogue will evolve naturally once the participants have already worked together and established a sense of trust and fellowship.48 Under the momentum of practical dialogue in the community, the partners in dialogue will move to prayer, reflection, discussion, and study. Knitter describes this dynamic:

> Having acted together, Buddhists and Christians and Muslims now reflect and talk together about their religious convictions and motivations. Here is where the partners in dialogue can enter into the scriptures and doctrines and explain not only to themselves but to others what it is that animates and guides and sustains them in their liberative praxis.49

**The Emergence from Obscurity.** An important byproduct of inter-religious dialogue is that it reinforces the perception of the status of the Baha'i Faith as an independent world religion, and one that has a contribution to make to the challenges facing humanity today. Dialogue also creates alliances and friendships that can protect the Baha'i community from future opposition. In reviewing the achievements of the Six-Year Plan (1986–92), the Universal House of Justice wrote that the Baha'i community's involvement in the work of inter-religious organizations was a significant landmark in the participation of the Bahá'í Faith in public affairs. In other words, institutional dialogue has made an important contribution to the emergence from obscurity:

> . . . the formal relationship which the Baha'i International Community established with the Conservation and Religion Network of the World Wide Fund for Nature and with the World Conference on Religion and Peace, in conjunction with numerous such relationships established by National and Local Spiritual Assemblies in their respective jurisdictions, reflects a trend in the Faith's emergence as an entity to be reckoned with.[50]

In summary, these are the main contributions of dialogue for the Baha'i community: it can aid in developing a more profound understanding of the Bahá'í writings and a Baha'i theology of world religions; it can contribute to the Baha'i peace program and to a greater public perception that the Baha'i Faith is emerging as an independent world religion; dialogue can act as a tool to transform the world religions in order to promote their unity; and dialogue can foster the process of broadening the applicability and relevance of the Baha'i Faith to non-Western societies.

## CHALLENGES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Dialogue presents a number of challenges to the Baha'i community. The first challenge is greater visibility. Bahá'ís have not always been invited to participate in interreligious exchanges. This is partly due to the fact that the Bahá'í Faith has not yet achieved world religion status in the eyes of many academics and religious leaders, and therefore would not be afforded the privilege of a platform with other world religions.51 Although the Bahá'í Faith is not a new religious movement (NRM), the Bahá'ís themselves must take up John Saliba's challenge to ensure their greater visibility at inter-religious encounters: "many members of NRM's apparently are not aware of the fact that social and religious acceptance are not immediately granted by outsiders but develop, often painfully, over a period of time."[52] As the Mormons have done over the last century, new religions need "to make concessions to become recognized as legitimate religious options"53 A central concession is the ability to benefit from the dynamic of internal self-criticism.

A related problem is that the development of Baha'i theology has not yet reached the requisite level from which a constructive dialogue with the other world religions can proceed. Historian of religion, Jacques Chouleur, noted in the 1970's that Baha'i theology is "too simple, too lax and vague. The assertion that all religions are one and that the teachings of God's envoys are identical may fail to convince those who go to the trouble of closely comparing the words attributed to Jesus, Muhammad or Buddha Gautama."[54] Bábí scholar, Denis MacEoin stated in the 1980's that "the level of sophistication of. . . Jewish or Christian scholarship is considerable and enables useful dialogue to take place. By way of contrast, the low level of attainment in Bahá'í writing precludes anything like a meeting of equals.

Comparability only exists with the productions of groups like Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, or Theosophists, with whom no useful dialogue is likely in any case."[55]

A 1994 survey of articles on the Baha'i Faith in academic periodicals demonstrates that even this comparison may be flattering. Over seventeen times more articles were written on Mormonism than the Baha'i religion during 1985-1993 according to one of the most comprehensive indexes of academic periodicals, the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*. Furthermore, the majority of the Baha'i articles in the 1980s were on the recent persecutions of Bahá'ís in Iran and the architectural aspects of the Baha'i House of Worship in New Delhi (dedicated in 1986). Few articles were published on theology, philosophy, or history.56 Not only is more scholarly literature badly needed, but a culture of critical reflection and reform, important elements in the scholarly discourse among dialogue communities, also need to be further developed in Baha'i studies. This need is further compounded by a vicious circle: the continued development of Baha'i studies in part depends on theological dialogue with other religions, but this dialogue cannot take place if Bahá'ís have nothing to offer such a process.

Further important challenges await followers of all faiths to avoid engaging in opportunistic manipulations of dialogue. "The term dialogue has become faddish, and is sometimes, like charity, used to cover a multitude of sins."[57] Among these sins is the "soft-sell" approach, which encourages partners in dialogue to express their views in the hope that such a "dialogue" may well make the "ignorant" person more receptive to the truth that only one side possesses. Some may also feel that in today's more fashionable climate of dialogue, they can more effectively communicate "the truth" to the "ignorant" in a less aggressive style. The clear mandate put forward in the Bahá'í writings is that of informed dialogue and cordial fellowship.58

However, awareness of such potential misuses of dialogue need not translate into a watered-down presentation of the truths held by the participants in the various religious traditions. When dialogue is truly free, participants will affirm their own beliefs clearly and passionately. One of the more appealing and effective methods of dialogue is that the laying bare of one's own deeply held religious convictions establishes at the same time an open climate that eagerly invites the dialogue partners to affirm their vision of the truth. Paul Knitter argues that participants should speak from the richness of their own religious

experience in order to persuade: "We seek not only to explain but to persuade." Therefore, dialogue is animated by "a certain missionary ***dlan.*** We want our partners to see what we have seen; we want their lives to be touched and transformed as ours have been."[59] Cobb reinforces this view: "Real dialogue consists in the effort of both sides to persuade the other."[60] The motivation here is of sharing with the dialogue partner, not trying to win them over. The hope is that the dialogue partner can be transformed by the process. As dialogue involves listening openly and attentively in an attempt to understand the other's position as precisely and as much from within as possible, Swidler notes that such an attitude assumes that at some point we might find the dialogue partner's position so persuasive that, if we were to act with integrity, we would have to change: "That means that there is a risk involved in dialogue that old positions and traditions may be found wanting."[61] If we talk of conversion, "then the conversion we seek is much more of a matter of ***metanoia,*** of trying to 'turn around our partners."[62] Transformation rather than conversion is the most appropriate term for the goal of dialogue.

Another challenge of interreligious dialogue is that participants may find themselves becoming increasingly alienated from their own religious community. Dialogue can be a lonely quest in which individuals engaging in dialogue may find themselves inadvertently drifting further and further away from their community of origin, partly because dialogue brings about a growth in understanding and an extension of religious experience that is not shared by those who have not participated.

To summarize, dialogue presents some real challenges. Bahá'ís must make greater efforts to ensure that they are valuable contributors in forums of religious dialogue. Baha'i participants should guard against a tendency to over-simplify a commonality of belief among the world's great religions. The Baha'i community must stimulate the development of more scholarly literature and Bahá'ís need to avoid conflating dialogue with propagation activities.

## STARTING POINTS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

I propose here three main approaches that the Bahá'í community could pursue in inter-religious dialogue. Each of these three "bridges"—the ethical, the intellectual, and the mystical/spiritual-can link

Bahá'ís to the communities of other faiths. Along each "bridge," some practical steps are suggested as starting points in this process.

***The Ethical Bridge.*** I argued above that cooperative social projects focusing on world peace are advantageous in that they call the participant religions to respond and create the momentum leading to deeper forms of association and dialogue. Examples of practical cooperation are given in a recent publication by Charles Kimball that charts a way forward for Christian-Muslim relations. He asserts that "opportunities for cooperative social action abound. Obvious concerns relate to societal problems such as homelessness, poverty, and the proliferation of drugs."63 Kimball argues that both communities can benefit from reciprocal learning, and that Christians in particular have much to learn from Muslim initiatives in drug and prison rehabilitation programs in North America. John Hick also notes that the major interfaith effort of Jews, Christians, and Muslims today "is rightly directed towards developing this practical cooperation in face of the pressing need to achieve peace and justice on earth within a sustainable global economy."64 One of Hans Küng's dialogical imperatives in the "postmodern" world is the need for local and regional interreligious groups and working parties to "discuss and remove problems where they arise, and investigate and realize possibilities for practical collaboration."65 Diana Eck writes that "our task is to learn to collaborate with one another on issues that none of us can solve alone," and argues that dialogue should begin with the questions that arise from the common context of our lives together.66

This applies to Baha'i communities who have both much to learn from and much to contribute to cooperative social projects with other religious communities. Examples of possible joint activities include overcoming the seven obstacles to world peace identified in *The Promise of World Peace:* racism, extremes of poverty and wealth, unbridled nationalism, religious strife, inequality between the sexes, the low levels of education and literacy throughout the world, and the lack of an international auxiliary language. On national and international levels, dialogue can assist in meeting the goals of the Baha'i International Community (BIC) at the United Nations whose external affairs strategy as outlined in October 1994, is "to guide the global activities of the community for the immediate future."67 BIC's strategy will concentrate especially on human rights, the status of women,

global prosperity, and moral development. In a similar vein, in 1990, Hans Küng proposed a future agenda for interreligious dialogue, after widespread consultation with representatives of the various world religions. The agenda includes the preservation of human rights, the emancipation of women, the realization of social justice, and the immorality of war.[68]

The challenge that the Universal House of Justice issued to the Bahá'í community in 1983 for "greater involvement in the development of the social and economic life of peoples"69 and the opening of "a wider horizon" of "new pursuits and undertakings upon which we must shortly become engaged"[70] invites Bahá'í communities to work creatively toward implementing their vision of an ever-advancing civilization, a process that would do well to involve the participation and contribution of other religions.

***The Intellectual Bridge.*** Theological dialogue must take note of religious differences. As noted in the introduction, Paul Knitter argues that "we have to deal with the manyness, the differences, among the religions before we can ever contemplate, much less realize, their possible unity or oneness."[71] This approach is endorsed in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the peoples of the world to "root out whatever is the source of contention amongst you,"[72] and the Universal House of Justice appeals to the religious leaders of the world to consider how their differences can "be resolved in theory and in practice."[73] Two difficulties are presented to Baha'is who approach dialogue with these questions in mind. The first is the tendency to oversimplify and to reduce all religions to something they are not. David Tracy warns against this danger, which is present in all religious communities that favor the primordial tradition: "The official pluralist too often finds ways to reduce real otherness and genuine differences to some homogenized sense of what we already know. . . . Some pluralists, the vaunted defenders of difference, can become the great reductionists-reducing differences to mere similarity, reducing otherness to the same, and reducing plurality to my community of right-thinking competent critics."[74]

A second related problem is to assume that religious differences will be swept away as all humanity gradually embraces the Bahá'í Faith. Although the Bahá'í writings suggest nothing of the sort, this attitude is occasionally expressed when Baha'is teach their faith. A notable and recent example of this assumption on outsider perception

is the comment of the current President of the World Congress of Faiths, Edward Carpenter. When Carpenter was asked about the relationship of the Baha'i Faith to Christianity, he explained: "it disturbs me when on occasion I hear a well-meaning Bahá'í taking the view that it is God's will that all religions will be absorbed, ultimately, into the Bahá'í Faith. This is a form of imperialism which, I think, we need to guard ourselves against."[75] Hans Küng has called for a dialogue that places emphasis on religious freedom and tolerance: "The question of truth must not be trivialized and sacrificed to the utopia of future world unity and one world religion. On the contrary, we are all challenged to think through anew, in an atmosphere of freedom, the whole question of truth."[76]

In order to resolve religious differences, Bahá'í scholars have identified a number of principles that are applicable to the many theological disputes among the religions. Among the most controversial differences are those concerning the nature of God and the nature of the founders of the various religious communities. Baha'i scholars have explored three theories that attempt to address these questions: cognitive relativism, the essence-attribute distinction, and complementarity. These theories can be seen as hypotheses that should be tested, developed, and refined in the context of interreligious dialogue.

Moojan Momen has argued that the Bahá'í principle of the relativity of religious truth means that any absolute knowledge of ultimate reality is impossible. Consequently, individuals possess no right to claim that their understanding is the only true one in any absolute sense. Of the Divinity, Bahá'u'lláh has written: "Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even hint at the nature of Thine Essence."[77] Consequently, all descriptions, all schemata, all attempts to define the nature of God, are limited by the viewpoint of the individual.[78] All such attempts "are but a reflection of that which hath been created within themselves."[79] This has led Momen to argue that the theory of "cognitive relativism" is an important approach to deal with conflicting truth claims among the religions. This theory presents the view that the differing ways of conceptualizing the Absolute Reality are each "true" relative to the individual who sincerely makes them. Momen applies the principle of relativism to resolve the contrast between the dualist (Judaeo-Christian-Islamic) and monist (Eastern religions) perceptions of the Ultimate. Momen explores 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

rich commentary of the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure," which presents the view that no matter how hard an individual strives in an effort to gain a knowledge of the Absolute, the only success is to achieve a better knowledge of his or her own self. 'Abdu'l-Baha likens this state of affairs to a compass: no matter how far the compass travels, it is only going around the point at its center. Similarly, however much human beings may strive for and achieve realms of spiritual knowledge, ultimately they are only attaining a better and greater knowledge of themselves, not of any exterior Absolute.80

As to the metaphysical nature of the prophet-founders, Juan Cole discusses the theological implications of the philosophical distinction between the essence of a thing and its attribute made by 'Abdu'l-Baha, rather like the phenomenon-noumenon distinction of Kant, to explain the differences between conceptions of the founders of the world religions:

> Essence and attribute have an identical referent, save that attribute is the thing as perceived and conceptualized, and essence is the thing as it is in itself. Insofar as perception is never direct, but always involves intermediaries between the perceiver and the object of perception, the essence of a thing uncolored by perceptual intermediaries . . . must remain in some sense unknowable.[81]

This approach can also significantly contribute to reconciling the differences in the representation of the Ultimate among the world's religions. An attempt in this direction has been made with John Hick's complex theory of religious pluralism. Hick uses Kant's phenomenon-noumenon distinction to hypothesize that the great world faiths are various responses to the Ultimate, conceived and experienced through differing human perceptions, some in terms of the Deity or Ultimate as personal, and others in terms of the Absolute as non-personal:

> On this view the God figures-Adonai, the Heavenly Father, Allah, Vishnu, Shiva, etc.-are different ***personae*** of the Real, formed jointly by the ultimate universal presence in which "we live and move and have our being" and by the different historical thought-forms projected by the human mind. Likewise the non-personal Brahman, Tao, Dharmakaya, etc. are ***impersonae*** of the Real, formed at the interface between the Real and the non-personal religious thought-forms that have been developed within yet other traditions.82

A third approach to religious differences is through the principle of complementarity. Cole applies Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity-a conceptual model to explain the observable phenomenon that electrons appear to behave under certain conditions like particles and under other conditions like waves-to explain differing understandings of the historical founders of the world religions:

> . the Manifestations of God exhibit evidences of both divinity and humanity in much the same way as electrons behave alternately as waves and particles and that as with the latter, so with the former, both models need taken in conjunction if a more complete understanding is to be reached.83

Cole suggests that the Christian-Muslim debate about the station of the founders of their religions can be partially reconciled by suggesting that Christians have perceived one aspect of the prophet-founder (the particle) and Muslims another (the wave).[84]

Again, this philosophical idea can be used to resolve differences in the conceptions of the deity. For example, Cobb, himself a pioneer in the field of Christian-Buddhist dialogue, has argued that Zen Buddhist thought and traditional Christian teaching in relation to the Ultimate can be seen to be complementary. The foci of the two traditions are seen as "compatible without being identical" so that the following resolution can be suggested:

> Is it not conceivable that in the full complexity of reality, so far exceeding all that we can know or think, "Emptying" identifies one truly important aspect, and "God" another? I think so: Would acknowledging that possibility contradict fundamentally what it is most important to either Zen Buddhists or Christians to assert? I think not. But to come to that conclusion does require that one rethink the insights on both sides.85

**The Mystical-Spiritual Bridge.** Much writing on interreligious dialogue has been done by individuals who have pioneered theological dialogue. Consequently, there has been a temptation to over-emphasize the importance of this form of dialogue. Monica Hellwig, a Catholic professor of interreligious dialogue, has made an important critique of theological dialogue and argued for the centrality of spiritual dialogue: "the exchange of theologies is not the fundamental or primary path to mutual understanding, but depends very heavily on some prior experience of the ritual, the life and story."[86] Drawing on the

thinking of Hans Gadamer and, in particular, his theory of interpretation, which proposes that the meaning of a dance is in the dancing of it, the meaning of a song is in the singing of it, and the meaning of life in the living, Hellwig proposes that "one approaches the meaning of others' dances, songs and lives across bridges of empathy in which the imagination enters into experience other than its own." It is only at this level that explanations, theories, and prescriptions convey meaning."[87] Hellwig is therefore, suggesting that spiritual dialogue is "a primary path" to understanding other religions.

This theme was explored by the distinguished Baha'i writer and dignitary George Townshend, who represented the Baha'i community at the first World Congress of Faiths in 1936. In his presentation, Townshend explored the importance of mystical experience in demonstrating the unity of religions, the striking "fundamental unity of all mystical experience":

> If one is to accept the account of their experience given by contemporaries or by themselves, these mystics seem all the world over to have gone upon the same spiritual adventure, to be drawn onward by the same experience of an outpoured heavenly love. . . .
>
> By what diverse paths have mystics who had nothing in common save whole-hearted servitude before the one loving God, by what diverse paths have they all alike attained the blessed Presence![88]

Townshend suggests that the example of mystics would lead worshippers in all religions to "find something in the fundamental nature of religion itself which promotes a sweet, precious and abiding sense of true companionship."[89]

There is also a sense in which the mystical-spiritual bridge can aid in developing the community life of religions. It is notable that Bahá'ís face a great challenge in cultivating a deeper sense of both spirituality and community. The ritual and mystical sparseness of Bahá'í community meetings has been noted by Michael Fischer, professor of anthropology at Rice University. He recalls his disappointment on visiting the Bahá'í House of Worship in Chicago in finding that the service lacked ritual richness and depth:

> As an anthropologist, however, I was somewhat disappointed: what was read from each text destroyed the particularity of the tradition from which it was drawn, leaving, seemingly, but banal platitudes.90

Momen has noted that "what we have in the West, where Baha'i groups meet for a few hours each week, can scarcely be called a community. The term 'Baha'i community' is more an expression of an aspiration than of present reality."[91] This weakness is sometimes reflected in the public presentation of their religion by Bahá'ís. Jacques Chouleur has observed "a certain reticence or timidity in exhibiting this mystic aspect of their religion and its Founder" in preference to a focus on the social teachings. He warns of the potentially tragic consequences of becoming detached from "the essentially mystic origin" of the Baha'i Faith. He concludes:

> The transfiguration of this earthly world by the implementation of the Bahá'í principles may be for them a doubtless exhilarating objective, but quite incomplete, insufficient if it is deprived of mysticism and contemplation.[92]

Thus, I would argue that the Baha'i community needs to engage in spiritual dialogue for two reasons. It provides a deeper understanding of other religions, or as Hellwig puts it "a primary path to mutual understanding," and an approach demonstrating the unity of religious experience. The mystical-spiritual bridge also addresses a deep need in the Bahá'í community to develop an ambience of spiritality and mysticism in Bahá'í gatherings, services, and commemorative events that can contribute to the creation of a richer community life.

In summary, I have examined three bridges that can link the Baha'i community to other religions in dialogue. I have proposed that the ethical bridge should focus on tackling obstacles to world peace in cooperative projects with other religious communities. The intellectual bridge needs to confront religious differences and attempt to resolve them. The mystical-spiritual bridge can significantly enrich the nature of Baha'i community and devotional life and contribute to a Baha'i theology of religions.

## NOTES

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1. Paul Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue: What? *why?* How?" in *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue, ed. by* L. Swidler, et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990) p. 20.

2. "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for all Systematic Reflection Today" in *Towards a Universal Theology of Religion,* ed. by L. Swidler (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) pp. 26-27.

3. "A Dialogue on Dialogue" in *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue,* ed. by L. Swidler, et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990) p. 8.

4. D. Eck, "What do we mean by 'Dialogue'?" *Current Dialogue,* vol. 11 (1986) p. 11.

5. Ibid., pp. 14-15.

6. *The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) K75, K144.

7. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas,* trans. by H. Taherzadeh with the assistance of a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) pp. 22, 35, 87.

8. H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic,* ed. by J. Milton Cowan (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979) p. 718.

9. E. W. Lane, *Arabic English Lexicon,* vol. 2 (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society Trust, 1984) p. 2051.

10. I am grateful to Stephen Lambden for this information.

11. H. E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983) pp. 281-82. Cf. Qur'an 22:13, where the masculine noun *'ashír* ("friend/companion") occurs.

12. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. by Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 215.

13. Ibid., pp. 215-16.

14. Ibid., p. 217.

15. *Tablets,* p. 67.

16. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912,* comp. Howard Macnutt, 2d. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) pp. 40, 42, 299, 339.

17. *Star of the West,* vol. 9, no. 3 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1978) p. 37.

18. The studies of Geza Vermes, for example, have caused New Testament scholars to revise the meaning of the phrase "Son of Man" and the New Testament texts in which this phrase is contained.

19. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 23 November 1934, in *Deepening our Understanding and Knowledge of the Faith,* comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) pp. 31-32.

20. From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *The Baha'i Magazine,* Vol. 24 (Chicago: Baha'i News Service, 1934) p. 144.

21. "Dialogue on Dialogue," p. 63.

22. Stephen Lambden, "Doing Baha'i Scholarship in the 1990s: A Religious Studies Approach," *The Bahá'í Studies Review,* vol. 3, no. 2 (1994) pp. 66-67.

23. Examples include the work of George Townshend and Robert Stockman in Protestant Christianity; Mirza Abu'l Fadl, Fadil Mazandarani, and Abbas Amanat in Shi'i Islam.

24. "Interreligious and Inter-ideological Dialogue," p. 5.

*25. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters,* rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 114.

26. Ibid., p. 58.

27. "Interview between a Prominent Rabbi and Abdul-Baha," *Star of the West,* vol. 3, no. 9 (24 June 1912) pp. 7.

28. Ibid.

29. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By,* rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 291.

*30. Promulgation of Universal Peace,* pp. 368,409.

31. "Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ on Christianity," *The Bahá'í Studies Review,* vol. 3, no.1 (1993) pp. 7-17.

*32. An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) pp. 1, 14.

33. Ibid., pp. 3, 7.

34. Ibid., p. xii.

35. "Dialogue," p. 9.

36. "Interreligious Dialogue," p. 23.

37. Cobb, "Dialogue," p. 9.

38. Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Survey of Christian Attitudes towards World Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1985) p. 221.

*39. Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic (New* York: Continuum, 1993) pp. 131-32.

40. "Learning from History," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies,* vol. 2, no.2 (1990) p. 61.

41. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979) p. 13.

42. Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 19851 p. 12.

*43. Promulgation of Universal Peace,* pp. 12.

44. "Interreligious Dialogue," p. 29.

45. "Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam" in *Towards a Universal Theology of Religion,* ed. by L. Swidler (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) p. 194.

*46. Global Responsibility,* p. 131.

47. D. Martin, "Bahá'u'lláh's Model for World Fellowship," *World Order,* vol. 11, no.1 (1976) p.19.

48. Knitter, "Response II," in *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue,* ed. by L. Swidler, et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990) p. 129.

49. "Interreligious Dialogue," p. 35.

50. Universal House of Justice, Riḍván Message, April 21, 1992, in *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1983-1992.* Comp. by Paul Lample (Riviera Beach, Florida: Palabra, 1992) p. 100.

51. For a discussion of this issue, see my paper "Is the Bahá'í Faith a World Religion?" *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies,* vol. 6, no.1 (1994) pp. 1-16.

52. J. A. Saliba, "Dialogue with New Religious Movements: Issues and Prospects," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies,* vol. 30, no.1 (1993) p. 72.

53. Ibid.

54. J. Chouleur, "The Bahá'í Faith: World Religion of the Future," *World Order,* Vol. 12, no. 1 (1977) p. 17.

55. D. MacEoin, "Problems of Scholarship in a Bahá'í Context," *Baha'i Studies Bulletin,* Vol. 1, no. 3 (1982) p. 58.

56. Seena Fazel, "The Baha'i Faith and Academic Journals," *The Baha'i Studies Review,* Vol. 3, no. 2 (1994) p. 83-85.

57. Swidler, "A Dialogue on Dialogue," p. 57.

58. The difficulties outlined are more problematic for NRM's (Saliba, "Dialogue with New Religious Movements," pp. 72–77), but nevertheless are present to one degree or another in the Baha'i community. Specific examples are found in Baha'i literature, where examples exist of dialogue being conflated with missionary-type activities, and where literature towards other religions is occasionally overtly critical. In an important review, Chris Buck has highlighted this failing of Baha'i apologetic literature: "Apologetic . . . has taken on implicit invective" and "that criticism is not sufficiently counterbalanced by construction." ("Review of *The Prophecies of Jesus* by M. Sours," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies,* Vol. 5, no. 2 [1992] pp. 79-86) It would appear that negative apologetics outweighs positive apologetics in some Bahá'í theological literature.

59. "Interreligious Dialogue," pp. 23.

60. "Dialogue," p. 9.

61. Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) p. 3.

62. Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue," p. 23.

63. C. Kimball, *Striving Together: A Way Forward in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) p. 119.

64. J. Hick, "Interfaith and the Future," *The Baha'i Studies Review,* Vol. 4, no. 1 (1994) p. 4.

65. *Global Responsibility,* p. 137.

66. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) pp. 213, 218.

67. Letter from the Universal House of Justice, Department of the

Secretariat to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 10 October 1994.

*68. Global Responsibility,* p. 88.

69. Letter of the Universal House of Justice, 20 October 1983, in *A* Wider *Horizon,* p. 139.

70. Universal House of Justice, Riḍván letter, 21 April 1983, in *A Wider Horizon,* p. 138.

71. "Interreligious Dialogue," p. 20.

*72. Gleanings,* p. 217.

*73. The Promise of World Peace* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) p. 12.

74. D. Tracy, "Christianity and the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations," *Religion and Intellectual Life,* Vol. 4 (1987) p. 12.

75. C. Gouvion and P. Jouvion, *The Gardeners of God: An Encounter with Five Million Baha'is* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993) p. 169.

76. "Foreword" to *The Peace Bible,* ed. by S. Scholl (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986) p. 8.

*77. Gleanings,* pp. 3-4.

78. Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics," in *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi: Studies in the Bábí & Baha'i Religions, Volume* 5, ed. by M. Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988) pp. 200-201.

79. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings,* p. 318.

80. Momen, "Relativism," p. 203.

81. J. R. I. Cole, "The Christian-Muslim Encounter and the Baha'i Faith," *World Order,* Vol. 12, no. 2 (1977-78) p. 24. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) pp. 146-50.

82. "Straightening the Record: Some Response to Critics," *Modern Theology,* Vol. 6, no. 2 (1990) p. 191.

83. "Christian-Muslim Encounter," pp. 26-27.

84. Ibid.

85. "Dialogue," p. 6.

86. M. K. Hellwig, "The Thrust and Tenor of Our Conversations," in *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue,* ed. by L. Swidler et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990) p. 50.

87. "Thrust and Tenor," p. 50.

88. G. Townshend, *Bahá'u'lláh's Ground Plan of World-Fellowship as Presented by 'Abdu'l-Baha* in *The Baha'i World.* Volume 6 (New York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1937) pp. 617, 618.

89. Ibid.

90. M. Fischer, "Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: The Baha'is of Yazd," in *The Baha'i Faith and Islam,* ed. by H. Moayyad (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990) p. 26.

91. "Learning from History," p. 66, fn. 11.

92. "The God of Bahá'u'lláh," *World Order,* Vol. 13, no. 1 (1978) pp. 18-19.

# HERMES TRISMEGISTUS AND APOLLONIUS OF TYANA IN THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

*Keven Brown*

The name Hermes Trismegistus is commonly associated with occult sciences such as theurgy, alchemy, and astrology, which partly originated in the technical Hermetic literature circulating in the Roman empire from as early as the second century B.C.E. Our modern expression "hermetically sealed" derives from the name Hermes. Apollonius of Tyana, the Pythagorian philosopher of the first century C.E., is less well known. Greek and Latin sources do not connect these two figures doctrinally, but in the Arabic Hermetic literature, some of which was translated from pagan Syrian sources in the time of Caliph Ma'mún (813–833), Apollonius (in Arabic Balínús) is often associated with Hermes. There he is depicted as the discoverer and representative of Hermes' teachings on the secrets of creation that had been lost to the generations before him. It is this later picture of Hermes and Apollonius that is most relevant to this study, for this is the tradition that is adopted by Bahá'u'lláh in his writings. In his Lawh-i Ḥikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), for example, Bahá'u'lláh states: "It was this man of wisdom [Balínús] who became informed of the mysteries of creation and discerned the subtleties which lie enshrined in the Hermetic writings."[1]

According to the Eastern, Islamic tradition of Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes was a divine philosopher or prophet who lived before the time of the Greek philosophers, and he was the first person to whom God instructed the secrets of wisdom and divine and natural

sciences. Muslims equate Hermes to the prophet Idrís, whom the Jews know as Enoch. In the Qur'an, it is written: "Commemorate Idrís in the Book; for he was a man of truth, a prophet; and we uplifted him to a place on high" (Q. 19:57–58). Hermes is also called the "father of the philosophers" in the Muslim Hermetic tradition, because he was believed to be the most ancient of those who propagated wisdom and sciences. In accord with this tradition, Bahá'u'lláh writes in his Lawh Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat (Tablet on the Simple Reality):

> The first person who devoted himself to philosophy was Idris. Thus was he named. Some called him also Hermes. In every tongue he hath a special name. He it is who hath set forth in every branch of philosophy thorough and convincing statements. After him Balínús derived his knowledge and sciences from the Hermetic Tablets and most of the philosophers who followed him made their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and statements.2

In this quotation, "after him" represents a long period of time, since Balínús lived in the first century C.E. The "philosophers who followed him" would, accordingly, refer to philosophers after the first century C.E. who followed the Hermetic tradition.

Inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh refers to Hermes and Apollonius in his writings, (1) what relevance does the Hermetic legacy in Islam have to Baha'i thought in general and (2) what attitude should Bahá'ís take toward these references in view of the declared infallibility of Baha'i scripture? The first question is important as part of an investigation of the sources of Bahá'u'lláh's cosmological teachings; the second question is significant insofar as it concerns the issue of scriptural interpretation in Baha'i theology. Before answering these questions, however, it is first necessary, in order to obtain a more balanced picture, to see how Hermes and Apollonius were viewed in the Roman empire before the conquest of Islam, and then see how they were incorporated into the Islamic worldview. Furthermore, what of their writings were known, and how did they influence religious and philosophical thought?

## HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

Since, from the fragmentary textual evidence remaining from the Roman empire, the names of Hermes and Apollonius are not associated with each other at that time, they will be examined separately. The

legendary name of Hermes Trismegistus in the Roman empire is, firstly, connected to the Egyptian god Thoth, whom Herodotus associated with the Greek Hermes in the fifth century B.C.E. In Egypt, in the most ancient period, Thoth was a powerful national god associated with the moon. As the moon is illuminated by the sun, likewise Thoth derived his authority from the sun god Re, to whom he acted as secretary and advisor. The moon ruled the stars and distinguished the seasons and months of the year, thus becoming the lord of time and the regulator of individual destinies. Thoth came to be viewed both as the source of cosmic order and of religious and civic institutions and, as such, he presided over temple cults and laws of state. According to one account: "Tiberius enacted his laws for the World in the same way as Thoth, the creator of justice."[3]

As the lord of wisdom, a role in which he was widely recognized, he was regarded as the origin of sacred texts and formulae, and of arts and sciences. The tradition that Thoth had revealed the arts of writing, number, geometry, and astronomy to Ring Ammon at Thebes was known to Plato and related by him in the *Phaedrus.4* As the scribe of the gods, he was the inventor of writing.5 Plutarch explains that the first letter of the Egyptian alphabet is the ibis, the sacred bird symbol of Hermes, because Hermes invented writing.6

Thoth was also a physician. In a representation of him from the time of Tiberius, he appears holding the stick of Asclepius with the snake.7 When a person died, he guided the soul to the afterlife, where he recorded the judgments of Osiris.[8] Because the Greek Hermes, like Thoth, was associated with the moon, medicine, and the realm of the dead, and both served as a messenger for the gods and were known for inventiveness, the Greeks assimilated Hermes to Thoth.[9] It is the Egyptian Thoth, however, who comes down to us as Hermes Trismegistus. Walter Scott believes that to distinguish this Hermes from the Greek Hermes, the Greeks added the epithet Trismegistus, meaning "thrice-great," which they borrowed from the Egyptian epithet for Thoth, *aá aá,* meaning "very great."[10]

But another view of Hermes also prevailed in the Roman empire, probably due to the appearance of the Hermetic writings between the late first and late third centuries C.E. In this view, Hermes is not a god but a divinely guided man or prophet. Long before, Plato had already questioned whether Thoth was a god or just a divine man.[11] In the writings ascribed to Hermes, he is usually pictured as the mortal agent of a holy revelation from God which offers salvation to the soul

from the bondage of matter and promises to disclose the secrets of creation. Ammianus Marcellinus, the fourth-century pagan historian, refers to Hermes Trismegistus, Apollonius of Tyana, and Plotinus as individuals with a special guardian spirit.12 To both Christians and pagans of the late Roman empire, the Egyptian Hermes was a real person of great antiquity. Some considered him to be a contemporary of Moses, and they regarded him as the first and greatest teacher of *gnosis* and *sophia,* from whose teachings later philosophers derived the fundamentals of their philosophy. For example, Iamblichus (d. c. 330 **C.E.),** one of the Neoplatonic successors of Plotinus, wrote that Plato and Pythagoras had each visited Egypt and there read the tablets of Hermes with the assistance of native priests.[13]

Baha'u'llah does not explicitly support a direct philosophical connection between Hermes and the early Greek philosophers, as Iamblichus does, but only between Hermes and Balinus and the philosophers who followed after Balinus in the Hermetic tradition. This is significant because part of the Islamic Hermetic tradition from which Baha'u'llah draws, as will be seen below, places Balinus prior in time to Aristotle, which is impossible in the light of historical evidence. Baha'u'llah, therefore, may be deliberately recounting those parts of the tradition that he believes to be true while remaining silent about those parts that he believes to be false.14 In regard to a possible Egyptian influence on the early Greek philosophers, Jonathan Barnes writes: "Although some [Egyptian] fertilization can scarcely be denied, the proven parallels are surprisingly few and surprisingly imprecise."[15]

Lactantius, one of the early fathers of the Christian Church, believed Hermes to be the Gentile prophet who not only predicted the coming of Christ but also recognized the Logos as God's son. He writes in his *Institutes:*

> And even though he [Hermes] was a man, he was most ancient and well instructed in every kind of learning-to such a degree that his knowledge of the arts and of all other things gave him the cognomen or epithet Trismegistus. He wrote books-many, indeed, pertaining to the knowledge of divine things-in which he vouches for the majesty of the supreme and single God and he calls Him by the same names which we use: Lord and Father. Lest anyone should seek His name, he says that He is "without a name," since He does not need the proper signification of a name because of His very unity.16

Augustine, likewise, allows that "Hermes makes many. . . statements agreeable to the truth concerning the one true God Who fashioned this world," but he also castigates Hermes for what appears to be his sympathy for the gods of Egypt.17

## THE HERMETIC WRITINGS

The Hermetica are those writings which in antiquity were ascribed to the figure of Hermes Trismegistus. Apart from this, there exists a body of Hermetic literature in Arabic that appears distinct from the Hermetica of the Roman empire, and which will be considered separately. These writings are presented as revelations of divine truth not as the products of human reason, which in itself distinguishes them from the Greek philosophical tradition. The Hermetica may be divided, for the sake of convenience, into two general categories: those which deal with philosophical and theological matters and those which are of a technical nature, i.e., texts on alchemy, astrology, and theurgy. Walter Scott, who translated the Hermetica into English and published it together with commentary and testimonia, put all of his attention on the philosophical writings.18 Other scholars of the Hermetica, including Andre-Jean Festugiere and Garth Fowden, treat the philosophical and technical texts as manifestations of a single worldview.

The philosophical texts that have survived to the present consist of collections of discourses in dialogue form, usually between Hermes and one or more of his disciples. They include the *Corpus Hermeticum* (*C.H.*), a collection of eighteen discourses including the well-known *Poimandres* as *C.H. I.* The last three discourses in this collection were commonly dropped out by Christians, probably because they contained material more noticeably pagan.20 Another collection, the *Anthologium,* was made by Stobaeus in the fifth century. It included extracts from *C.H. II, IV,* and X, and from otherwise unattested Hermetica. Neither of these collections included the *Asclepius*, or *Perfect Discourse,* which contains Hermes' famous prophecy on Egypt. The *Perfect Discourse* has survived only in Latin, save for Greek fragments in Lactantius, likely because the work contains several passages of a clearly pagan nature, which were proscribed by Byzantine censorship.21 Other specimens of philosophical Hermetica are known to exist in Coptic and Armenian translations.22

The general consensus of modern scholars, beginning with Isaac Casaubon in 1614, puts the composition of the philosophical texts between the late first to the late third centuries C.E.[23] The composition of the technical texts may have begun as much as two centuries earlier. These calculations are based on external testimonia and analysis of the linguistic style and the doctrinal content of the texts. Tertullian of Carthage is the earliest known writer to quote from the philosophical Hermetica in his *Adversus Valentinianos* and the *De anima,* both composed around 206–207.[24] There are earlier references to Hermetic texts. Galen of Pergamon mentions a treatise on medical botany by Hermes Trismegistus that was supposedly well-known in the first century.[25]

The modern dating of the texts refutes the possibility that they themselves are an ancient fount of divine wisdom pre-dating Plato. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Hermetica represent an authentic Egyptian religious tradition that came under the influence of Greek philosophy and was later written down in a highly Hellenized style. This idea was proposed in antiquity in a book called *Abammonis Ad Porphyrium Responsum,* written by Iamblichus, although ostensibly written by Abammon, an Egyptian priest of high rank, in reply to questions addressed by Porphyry (c. 232-301). Porphyry asked about the theology and religious practices of the Egyptians, especially about theurgy, implying that he found it difficult to reconcile them with his own beliefs. "Abammon" says that he will base his answers on two sources: (1) the "books of Thoth," written in ancient times by Egyptian priests, and (2) books written by recent writers who have condensed or summarized the contents of the ancient writings. Under the second category, the author includes the Greek Hermetica, which Porphyry said he had read. Abammon explains that these texts were based on Egyptian documents which were translated, paraphrased, or interpreted by priests who were experts in Greek philosophy.26 According to this scheme, the works of Balínús known in the Islamic tradition would also fall under the second category, since he was regarded as the discoverer and propounder of the Hermetic writings.

Scott was of the opinion that if the above hypothesis was true, then the Egyptian priests of the Roman period could only have imagined that they found doctrines in their ancient writings that were in accord with Platonic philosophy. But there have been some modern scholars more sympathetic to the view of Abammon. For example, in 1904, Richard Reitzenstein published his *Poimandres* wherein he

challenges Isaac Casaubon's opinion that the Hermetica were merely Christian forgeries. William C. Grese sums up Reitzenstein's position in that work: "Reitzenstein portrayed the Hermetica as a Hellenistic development of ancient Egyptian religion."27 With the publication of the Nag Hammadi library of Coptic gnostic and Hermetic texts in the 1970s, Garth Fowden states that Hermetic scholarship has entered a new phase, one which emphasizes a closer connection of the Hermetica to traditional Egyptian thought.28

It is true that the Roman empire in the first few centuries after Christ was known for the syncretistic drive of its component cultures. Greeks and Romans were borrowing from the Egyptians, the Jews, and the Persians, while these cultures in turn borrowed from the Greeks and the Romans, and from each other. The intermingling of races as well as religious and philosophical ideas made such borrowing not only possible but necessary, and contributed to a widespread feeling of toleration.

In common with revived Platonism and Pythagoreanism, and with the monotheistic religions of the time, Hermeticism taught that all beings derive from one supreme God, who is the object of each soul's adoration. Although some of the Hermetic texts may lend themselves to a pantheistic interpretation, God is also depicted as a personal creator, who is separate and independent from the world He creates. Fowden concurs: "Some conception of the transcendence of God (as, for example, the creator of the All rather than Himself the All) can often be found even in the most immanentist of treatises."[29] One's view of God depends upon the level of understanding obtained while journeying through the stages of the "way of Hermes.30 Hermes says: "By stages he [the seeker] advances and enters into the way of immortality."[31]

The first step of the soul seeking reunion with God is to recognize its own ignorance, for only then can it obtain the knowledge of God.[32] It is God's wish to be known by humanity, God's most glorious creation.[33] Knowing God requires the second birth of the spirit, the unveiling of the "essential" human within, which means that the seeker must acquire wisdom, practice virtue, and learn detachment from worldly things.34 Life is the classroom for such spiritual transformation. "The pious fight," teaches Hermes, "consists in knowing the divine and doing ill to no man."[35] A human being becomes divine as he or she reflects the divine virtues that are equivalent to the essential self, which is the image of God. Such a life includes praying and

singing hymns of praise to God. It does not preclude marriage and a normal family life, according to Hermes.36

## APOLLONIUS OF TYANA

Unlike the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, who is veiled in the mists of legend, Apollonius of Tyana is a known historical figure. According to his chief biographer, Flavius Philostratus (c. 175–245), Apollonius lived to be over ninety years old and died near the end of the first Christian century. Recent scholarship puts Apollonius' life between approximately 40-120 C.E.[37] The empress Julia Domna, who was born in Syrian Emesa in the eastern confines of the Roman empire where Apollonius had flourished, commissioned Philostratus to write the life of Apollonius, which was completed some time after Julia Domna's death in 217. Philostratus says of his sources:

> I have gathered my materials partly from the many cities that were devoted to him, partly from the shrines which he set right when their rules had fallen into neglect, partly from what others have said about him, and partly from his own letters. . . . But my more detailed information I have gathered from a . . . man called Damis who . . . became a disciple of Apollonius and has left an account of his master's journeys, on which he claims to have accompanied him, and also an account of his sayings, speeches and predictions. . . I have also read the book by Maximus of Aegae, which contains all that Apollonius did there. . . But it is best to ignore the four books which Moeragenes composed about Apollonius, because of the great ignorance of their subject that they display.38

As to the reliability of Philostratus' work and the possibility of reconstructing an accurate historical picture of Apollonius of Tyana from it, modern historians generally agree that Philostratus fabricated much of his biography to please the expectations of his patroness. Such likely fabrications include the figure of Damis, the accounts of Apollonius' encounters with several Roman emperors, and Apollonius' journeys to India and Rome.[39] Apollonius does not seem to have been known in Rome until the fourth century, when his legend became famous due to the controversy between Eusebius and Hierocles, which will be explained below. Philostratus himself was "a man of letters and a sophist full of passion for Greek Romance and for studies in rhetoric . . . hardly interested in the historical Apollonius."[40]

The works by Maximus and Moeragenes have not survived, although there is a reference to Moeragenes' work by Origen in his *Contra Celsum,* in which he mentions Moeragenes' view that Apollonius was both a philosopher and a magician.41 The earliest known mention of Apollonius is in Lucian's *Alexander sive Pseudomantis* written in about 180C.E., in which he ridicules Alexander as a charlatan whose teacher had been a pupil of Apollonius.42 In sum, historical sources contemporary with Apollonius are silent about him, those remaining from the second century are sparse and fragmentary, and Philostratus' biography written in the first half of the third century is unreliable. Furthermore, there is no body of extant works by Apollonius in Greek or in Syriac (at least ones considered to be authentic) to give us an accurate picture of his teachings. All that remains from the Greek is a collection of about one hundred of his letters, most quite short and some probably fabricated after his death. A fragment from a work of Balínús entitled *Concerning Sacrifices* found in Eusebius was probably translated into Greek, because Philostratus says that Apollonius wrote this book in his "own language," Syriac.[43] Given this state of affairs, revealing the true Apollonius is a formidable if not impossible task. Nevertheless, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* and the letters give us a picture of Apollonius that cannot be entirely out of line.

Philostratus describes many of Apollonius' wonderful acts, but he chooses to stress his wisdom, his ascetic practices, and his mission to restore the purity of the ancient religions of the empire. That Apollonius could do things beyond the capability of ordinary men, Philostratus explains, was the result of the "knowledge which God reveals to wise men."[44] His wonders consisted primarily of instances of divining the future, seeing or hearing things in visions, and healing the sick. In a case where he restored a young girl to life upon meeting her funeral procession, Philostratus comments: "He may have seen a spark of life in her which her doctors had not noticed, since apparently it was drizzling and steam was coming from her face."[45]

As Christianity grew in size and power, some pagans felt compelled to respond to the miracles Christians attributed to Christ with their own stories about the miracles of Apollonius. The first to do so in writing, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, was Hierocles, a philosopher and the governor of Bithynia at that time (302). He wrote a work called *A Friend of the Truth,* in which he contrasts the wonderful

works of Apollonius with the miracles of Christ as a proof to Christians that they should not claim divinity for Christ based on his miracles. Eusebius of Caesarea responded vehemently to Hierocles, not by disclaiming the virtue of Apollonius, but by discrediting Philostratus' biography of Apollonius.[46] Lactantius, who heard Hierocles read his book publicly in Nicomedia, argued that Christ is divine, not because of the miracles he did, but because it was Jesus who had fulfilled the prophecies announced by the Jewish prophets.47 As a result of this debate between Christians and pagans, Apollonius' legend as a wonder worker began to grow and Philostratus' biography became popular. The cult at the temple of Asclepius in Aegaeae, where Apollonius had served as a healer of both bodies and souls, began to flourish again (as did many other temples loyal to his memory), until the emperor Constantine had this temple destroyed in 331.[48]

Where did the legends of Apollonius' talismans come from? They are not mentioned by Philostratus, so they were either unknown to him or he did not wish to speak about them. Maria Dzielska, whose book *Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History* has been very helpful in constructing this account of Apollonius, has explained this question. Eusebius is the first to refer to them in his *Contra Hieroclem*. He says that "certain queer implements attributed to Apollonius were used in his times."[49] After Eusebius, references to Apollonius' talismans begin to appear frequently. Pseudo-Justin mentions the dissemination of Apollonius' talismans in Antioch. It appears that these objects were so popular that Antioch's church leaders decided to accept them. Pseudo-Justin illustrates the problem in a work containing a dialogue between a theologian and a Christian:

> The Christian is concerned about the popularity and spread of Apollonius' talismans. He wonders how to explain their magical powers. . . He wonders why God . . . allows them. . . . The theologian dispels his doubts saying that there is nothing evil about those objects because they were produced by Apollonius who was an expert in the powers governing nature and in the cosmic sympathies and antipathies . . and that is why they did not contradict God's wisdom ruling the world.50

The talismans, which were usually made out of stone or metal, were placed in cities to protect their inhabitants against plagues, wild animals, vermin, natural disasters, and the like. Two other centers in the Greek east where memories of Apollonius had been strongest, Agaeae

and Tyana, were completely converted to Christianity by this time, so there is no mention of Apollonius' talismans there. However, surprisingly, in Constantinople itself, Apollonius' talismans became popular. The sixth-century Antiochian historian Malalas wrote that, during Domitian's rule, Apollonius paid a visit to Byzantium where he left many talismans in order to help the Byzantines in their troubles.[51] In the thirteenth century, in the hippodrome in Byzantium, there was still a bronze eagle holding a snake in its claws, which citizens said had been placed there by Apollonius to protect them against a scourge of venomous snakes. This talisman was destroyed by the crusaders in 1204.[52]

What is left of Apollonius' reputation if we divest him of his time-honored epithet "the producer of talismans, the performer of wonders"? In Philostratus' ***Life of*** *Apollonius,* we are told that Apollonius was a man vigorously devoted to God and to the spiritual life, one who accepted all creeds as diverse expressions of one universal religion. In a letter to his brother, he writes: "All men, so I believe, belong to the family of God and are of one nature; everyone experiences the same emotions, regardless of the place or condition of a person's birth, whether he is a barbarian or a Greek, so long as he is a human being."[53] In the fragment from the work of Apollonius called *Concerning Sacrifices,* he advises: "It is best to make no sacrifice to God at all, no lighting a fire, no calling Him by any name that *men* employ for things of sense. For God is over all, the first; and only after Him do come the other gods. For He doth stand in need of naught, even from the gods, much less from us small men. . . . The only fitting sacrifice to God is man's best reason [i.e., man's "showing to God his own perfection" according to Dzielska[54]], and not the word that comes out of his mouth."[55]

Wherever he traveled, Apollonius is said to have discouraged the use of animals for sacrifice, and encouraged the use of incense instead. Philostratus relates that he refused to eat meat and subsisted on a diet of fruits and vegetables. As part of his daily regimen, Apollonius prayed three times a day: at daybreak, mid-day, and at sundown. Damis describes his manner as gentle and modest, yet if some injustice was being committed he would be the first to speak out against it. For example, in a letter to some Roman officials, he states: "Some of you take care of harbors, buildings, walls, and walkways. But, as for the children in the cities or the young people or the women, neither you nor the laws give them any thought. If things were otherwise, it

would be good to be governed by you."[56] In a letter to Valerius, we learn something about his opinion on human immortality: "There is no death of anything except in appearance only, just as there is no birth of anything except in appearance only. For the passage of something from the realm of pure substance into that of nature appears to be birth, and likewise the passage of something from the realm of nature into that of pure substance appears to be death."57

## THE ISLAMIC HERMETIC TRADITION

It is not clear when Hermetic works first became known to Muslims. According to the great catalogist, Ibn an-Nadim, some alchemical treatises were known and used by Khálid (d. c. 720), son of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid II.[58] Later, the famous Muslim alchemist, Jabir ibn Ḥayyán (722–815), developed a good part of his own cosmological system from the *Sirr al-Khalíqa* (The Secret of Creation) attributed to Balínús (i.e., Apollonius of Tyana), which Balínús says he derived from the *Kitáb al-'Ilal* (The Book of Causes) of Hermes.59 In his works, Jabir also claims to have been an intimate disciple of the sixth Shi'i Imam, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣádiq (d. 765), who acted as "Jabir's critic and guide par excellence."[60] Although Jabir's link to Ja'far aṣ-Ṣádiq and the traditional dating and authorship of the Jabirian corpus have all been challenged by Paul Kraus in his monumental study, recent and more critical scholarship by Syed Nomanul Haq shows that Kraus was unduely skeptical in his judgement.[61] The name Hermes and perhaps Persian versions of Hermetic texts were also known during the reign of Hárún ar-Rashíd (786-809). Ar-Rashíd's Persian librarian and court astrologer, Abú Sahl al-Fadl, mentions a Babylonian Hermes, whose works were translated into Pahlavi during the reign of the Sasanian monarch, Shápúr. Abú Sahl is said to have translated some of those works for ar-Rashid.

Whatever the case may be, the identification of Hermes with the quranic Idrís, who had already been identified with Enoch by the Jews,[63] was made by the pseudo-Sabians of Harran during the reign of al-Ma'mún. In the words of Mas'údí (d. 959), "Enoch is identical with the prophet Idrís; the Sabians say he is the same person as Hermes."[64] Harran, in Syria, had remained a stronghold of pagan religion and learning where Christianity had not been able to penetrate. Here, it seems that both philosophical and technical Hermetica were

well-known and in use. The story of al-Ma'mún's encounter with the Ḥarránians is related by Ibn an-Nadim, who took his account from that of a Christian named Abú Yúsuf Ayṣ ha' al-Qaṭí'í. According to this account, the caliph was on a military expedition into the land of the Byzantines, during which time he was received by people who came to swear allegiance to him. Among them were the Ḥarránians. When al-Ma'mún asked them about their religion, they were unable to give a satisfactory answer. Al-Ma'mún said, "Then you must be heretics and worshipers of idols; your blood is lawful. . . . You must choose either Islam or any of the religions which God has mentioned in His Book, otherwise you shall be exterminated."[65] To escape from this impasse, the Ḥarránians identified themselves with the Mandaean Sabians mentioned in the Qur'an, and said that their prophets were Hermes and Agathodaimon (said to be the biblical Seth), and their scriptures the writings of Hermes.

Al-Kindí (c. 850) gives an account of the teachings of the Ḥarránian Hermeticists, recorded in the memoir of Aḥmad ibn ath-Thayyib, which bears some resemblance to teachings found in the Greek philosophical Hermetica:

> The Sabians with one accord teach as follows: The world has one First Author, who has never ceased to be, who is unique and without plurality, and to whom none of the attributes of caused things are applicable. He (God) imposed on those of his creatures that are endowed with the faculty of judgement the duty of acknowledging his supremacy; he revealed to them the right way (of life and thought), and sent emissaries (prophets) to guide them aright, and to establish proofs (of Gods existence). He bade these prophets summon men to (live according to) God's good pleasure, and warn them of God's wrath. . . According to their opinion, the rewards and punishments will affect the spirit only, and will not be postponed to an appointed time [i.e., there is no resurrection of the body, and no one Day of Judgment for all mankind together].@

The Arabic Hermetic writings, a large share of which belong to the technical category, are numerous, and many of these texts have yet to be studied.67 "The Book of Causes" of Hermes, adopted by Balínús under the title of ***The Secret*** of ***Creation,*** has already been mentioned. It ranges from explaining the metaphysical origin of the universe to considerations on the ontological categories of the world and the nature of the human soul. The Arabic version of this book is no doubt based on an original written in Syriac, Balinds's native tongue. A

Christian monk of Neapolis in Palestine named Sájiyús states that he translated the work (into Arabic?) "so that those who remain after me may have the benefit of reading it."[68] A number of the sayings of Hermes quoted in the *Má' al-Waraqí* (The Silvery Water) by Ibn Umail have been shown to be derived from Greek alchemy texts.[69] Arabic authors who have included collections of philosophical and ethical sayings attributed to Hermes in their works include Ibn al-Qifti, al-Shahrastani, Hunayn ibn Isḥáq, Miskawayh, Ibn Durayd, al-Mubashshir, and Abú Sulaymán al-Mantiqi. A discourse by Hermes to the human soul in Arabic, *Mu'ádilat an-Nafs,* was translated into Latin under the title *Hermes de Castigatione Animae.* Scott says of this work: "The doctrines taught in [it] have been derived from the similar doctrines taught in Greek writings; and it seems not unlikely that some of them are more or less exact translations of Greek Hermetica which were written in Egypt before A.D. 300, and were included in the collection of Hermetica which the Harranian Sabians, in A.D. 830, put forward as their scripture."[70]

From the time of al-Ma'mún forward, references to Hermes and the Hermetic writings are frequent in the writings of Muslim philosophers and historians. Their view and that held by their Christian contemporaries in the West continued to be the view held by many people in antiquity: Hermes was a divine sage or prophet and the founder of sciences and of wisdom. Coming closer to the time of Bahá'u'lláh, the Safavid philosopher Mullá Ṣadrá (d. 1640) writes: "Know that wisdom originally began with Adam and his progeny Seth and Hermes. . . . And it is the greatest Hermes who propagated it throughout the regions of the world . . . and made it emanate upon the true worshipers. He is the Father of the philosophers and the master of those who are the masters of the sciences."[71]

As for Balínús, he carries into Islam the same contradictory reputation that followed him in the Roman empire. In one view, he is presented as a magician who, in various cities of the Middle East, erected talismans (consecrated objects) to protect their inhabitants from floods, famines, insects, and the like. The *Kitáb at-Talásim al-Akbar* (The Great Book of Talismans), addressed by Balínús to his son, is a book in this category. It partly matches up with a Greek pseudepigraph titled *The Book of Wisdom of Apollonius of Tyana,* which Dzielska believes was composed no earlier than the late fifth century, probably in Antioch by Christian Gnostics.[72] For example, when

Balinus is threatened by one of the Roman emperors with death, he miraculously escapes to Antioch through a basin that had been prepared for him in the palace. A demon was frightening the inhabitants of Antioch when Balinus, in the middle of being bled, reduces him to obedience with one word, obliges him to serve his bath, and then chases him through the eastern gate of the city. Upon the request of the inhabitants, he regulates the flow of the river and places talismans against the lice and rats.73 This tradition of Balínús, therefore, must have found its way into Islam some time after the Muslims conquered Syria.

Jabir ibn Ḥayyán, like Philostratus earlier, defends a different picture of Balinus. In his *Kitáb al-Baḥt,* he criticizes vehemently such stories of magical exploits and attributes them to the inventions of charlatans and liars. If Balinus is truly the master of talismans, according to Jabir, it is not due to magic but to his perfect knowledge of the properties of things. For Jabir and other Muslim scientists, Balinus was primarily a natural philosopher, and they attribute to him several cosmological, astrological, and alchemical treatises.[74] Among these are the *Sirr al-Khaliqa,* mentioned above, and the *Dhakhirat al-Iskandar* (The Treasury of Alexander). In the introduction to the latter, Aristotle is made to present the book to Alexander, which he says was given to him by Balinus, who retrieved it from a watery tomb, where Hermes had deposited it for safekeeping. The book discusses, among other things, the principles of alchemy and the manufacture of elixirs, the composition of poisons and their antidotes, and the use of talismans for healing.75 Jabir ibn Ḥayyán also wrote ten books according to the opinion of Balinus (*'alá ra'y Balínús*). A collection of sayings from Balinus in Arabic have come into Latin under the title *Dicta Belini.* There is also a work in Arabic by a disciple of Apollonius named Artefius, called *Miftáḥ al-Ḥikmat* (The Key to Wisdom).[76]

## HERMES TRISMEGISTUS AND APOLLONIUS OF TYANA IN THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

With this information as background, it is now possible to answer the first question posed in the introduction: what is the relevance of the Islamic Hermetic tradition to Bahá'í thought? Bahá'u'lláh's reference to Hermes/Id& as the first person to devote himself to philosophy and how Balinus derived his knowledge from the Hermetic writings has already been cited in the introduction. Another passage,

along these lines, can be found in Bahá'u'lláh's Lawh-i Ḥikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), here cited in full:

> I will also mention for thee the invocation voiced by Balínús, who was familiar with the theories put forward by the Father of Philosophy [Hermes] regarding the mysteries of creation as given in his chrysolite tablets. . . .
>
> This man hath said: "I am Balinus, the wise one, the performer of wonders, the producer of talismans." He surpassed everyone else in the diffusion of arts and sciences and soared unto the loftiest heights of humility and supplication. Give ear unto that which he hath said, entreating the All-Possessing, the Most Exalted: "I stand in the presence of my Lord, extolling His gifts and bounties and praising Him with that wherewith He praiseth His Own Self, that I may become a source of blessing and guidance unto such men as acknowledge my words." And further he saith: "0 Lord! Thou art God and no God is there but Thee. Thou art the Creator and no creator is there except Thee. Assist me by Thy grace and strengthen me. My heart is seized with alarm, my limbs tremble, I have lost my reason and my mind hath failed me. Bestow upon me strength and enable my tongue to speak forth with wisdom." And still further he saith: "Thou art in truth the Knowing, the Wise, the Powerful, the Compassionate." It was this man of wisdom who became informed of the mysteries of creation and discerned the subtleties which lie enshrined in the Hermetic writings.77

Balínús' exclamation: "I am Balinus, the wise one, the performer of wonders, the producer of talismans," quoted by Baha'u'llah, can be found in the introduction to the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*. This statement may be a literary stock piece derived from the tradition that primarily regards Apollonius as a miracle worker. As for the supplications of Balinus to God cited by Bahá'u'lláh, they can also be found verbatim in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*.[78] They do reflect faithfully the picture of Apollonius given by Philostratus as one devoted to serving the one God behind the many. On the question of Baha'u'llah citing from ancient accounts, Juan Cole has established that several passages in the Tablet of Wisdom about the Greek philosophers are actually quotations from the works of Muslim historians such as Abu'l-Fatḥ ash-Shahristani (1076-1153) and 'Imadu'd-Din Abu'l-Fidá' (1273–1331).[79]

According to Balinus in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*, God brought the universe into existence in the following manner:

> The first thing to be created was God's Word: "Let there be so and so." That Word was the cause of all creation, all other created things being the

> effects thereof. . . . Now, there is no doubt that a caused thing has a cause; otherwise, it would be self-subsistent (*fard*), and this is manifestly not the case. Next it must be asked whether its cause is connected to it or not, for if it is connected [i.e., ontologically similar], then the cause is created, and if it is not connected to it [i.e., ontologically different], then it is not created and not, therefore, a cause. As we have explained, it is not possible for the Creator to be the cause of what He has created, because the cause must resemble in certain respects that of which it is the cause and differ from it in other respects, while the Creator has no resemblance to His creation whatsoever. Verily, the cause [of creation] must needs be other than God. It is, as we have described, the likeness of all created things in one respect and their contrary in another. Indeed, the Word of God--exalted be His glory-is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive. For it is neither a property nor a substance, neither hot nor cold, neither dry nor moist. But it was through it that all these things came to be. It is the Permission of God and His Command. Man cannot grasp the Word of God, for he is powerless to comprehend anything that transcends his own station. The human intellect is only capable of grasping what is associated with it in the realm of creation, because it is of the world and the world is of it, and man apprehends it according to his own capacity.
>
> The first thing to arise after God's Word was action (*fi'l*). By action motion is implied, and by motion heat. This was the beginning of natural causation. Then, when motion diminished and ceased the opposite state of rest occurred, and by rest coldness is implied. That motion, which is the heat, is the spirit of our Father, Adam.80

Balínús goes on to explain how the four elements were formed and the heavenly bodies, and plants and animals, the crowning goal of the process of creation being human beings. This picture of creation is strikingly close to the theory for creation given by Bahá'u'lláh in the Lawḥ-i Ijikmat. There, Bahá'u'lláh states that the Word of God is "the cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof." He goes on to say, almost verbatim with Balínús, that this transcendent reality, the Word of God, "is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. . . . [It] is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things."[81]

Bahá'í texts likewise take the position that God is not the cause of contingent beings in a necessary sense, wherein cause and effect share the same substratum of existence. The idea of creation as a necessary emanation from the Creator was accepted by most of the Islamic philosophers. Bahá'u'lláh, however, follows the position of the

Islamic theologians in teaching that God is the creator of the world by choice. As a voluntary agent, God's relation to contingent existence is one of beneficence only. As it is expressed in Baha'u'llah's Hidden Words: "I loved thy creation, hence I created thee."[82] God has willed creation into being freely, out of love. It is the Will, or Word, of God, which is God's first "emanation" (first in the sense of priority, not time), that has a necessary connection to created things, such that Bahá'u'lláh calls nature both "God's will and . . . its expression."[83] In other words, the Will of God, once issued from the Supreme Godhead, necessarily manifests nature and all the beings in the universe, and it is itself, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, identical to the inner realities of all created things.84

Baha'u'llah continues to follow the cosmology of the *Sirr al-Khalíqa* very closely: the first thing to be generated from the Word of God is heat, and this heat is the cause of all motion in the universe.85 Although Balínús seems to equate heat and motion in the passage cited above, a little later when discussing the origin of the elements, he clarifies that "the *cause* of motion is heat, and the cause of rest is coldness."[86] In Baha'u'llah's scheme, the Word of God possesses two complementary poles, one active and the other receptive, for Baha'u'llah states in the Lawh-i Ḥikmat that "the world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient."[87] It is my opinion that the active force and the recipient mentioned by Baha'u'llah in the Lawh-i Ḥikmat correspond to the incorporeal, eternal Forms of Plato and primary matter, the passive, formless medium for their reflection.88 This notion is further confirmed by Baha'u'llah in one of his tablets wherein he says: "The meaning of the active force is the lord of the species *(rabbi naw')*, and it has other meanings."[89] In the terminology of the Illuminationist philosophers, the lords of specie2 are the same as Platonic Forms, which are the formal causes of the individual members of the species over which they have influence.[90]

In Bahá'í texts, as in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*, the formative, purposeful motion, which is the effect of the heat generated by the Word of God, becomes, first of all, the four elements (also called by Bahá'u'lláh the two agents and the two patients, and which should not be confused with the active force and its recipient). For example, Baha'u'llah states in the Lawh-i Ayiy-i Núr: "Know that the first tokens brought into existence by the pre-existent Cause in the worlds of creation are

the four elements: tire, air, water, and earth."[91] These four elements are equivalent to the four basic states of matter in the modern sense: solid, gaseous, liquid, and radiant, and they were understood in a similar way by the ancient philosophers.[92]

The theory of creation presented in the Lawh-i Ḥikmat and other Bahá'í texts focuses chiefly on the metaphysical origin of existence. Bahá'u'lláh, in most cases, leaves the explanation of physical processes in nature to science, advising researchers to observe nature carefully, rather than to impose pre-conceived models on reality: "Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and . . . it will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder."[93]

Another Bahá'í text wherein Bahá'u'lláh mentions Hermes and Apollonius together is one of the Tablets of the Elixir (*alwáḥ-i iksír*). In this text, Baha'u'llah quotes from the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, which alchemists claim conceals the secret of their craft. Baha'u'llah relates:

> Balínús, the sage, upheld the same view and mentioned the inscription on the Tablet held in the hand of Hermes. He said: "In truth and of a certainty, there is no doubt that the higher is from the lower and the lower is from the higher. The working of wonders is from one as all things came from one. Its father is the sun and its mother is the moon." Furthermore, He said: "The subtle is nobler than the gross. The light of lights with the power of all powers ascends from earth to heaven and then descends. It is supreme over both earth and heaven, the higher and the lower."[94]

This passage can be found in its entirety on two pages of Jábir ibn Hayyan's *Kitáb Usṭuqus al-Uss*.[95] According to the account recorded in the introduction to the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*, Balínús discovered both the Emerald Tablet of Hermes and the "Book of Causes" while exploring a crypt beneath a statue of Hermes:

> Thus, I found myself across from an old man seated upon a golden throne who was holding in his hand an emerald Tablet on which was written: "Here is the craft of nature." And in front of him was a book on which was written: "Here is the secret of creation and the science of the causes of all things." With complete trust I took the book [and the Tablet] and went out from the crypt. Thereafter, with the help of the book, I was able to learn the secrets of creation, and through the Tablet, I succeeded in understanding the craft of nature.[96]

The full text of the Emerald Tablet can be found at the end of the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*. The first part that Bahá'u'lláh quotes is very close to the version given in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa* (reading variant L), but the second part does not quite correspond with any of the variants given by the editor. Hence, Jábir must have had access to still another version. According to the Aleppo edition prepared by Ursula Weisser, the Emerald Tablet reads:

> In truth and of a certainty, there is no doubt that the higher is from the lower and the lower is from the higher. The working of wonders is from one as all things came from one by the treatment of the one. Its father is the sun and its mother is the moon. The wind has borne it in its belly, and the earth has nourished it. It is the father of talismans, the bearer of wonders, and the perfecter of powers-a fire which became earth. Separate the earth from the fire, [for] the subtle is nobler than the gross, with care and prudence. It ascends from earth to heaven and then descends back to the earth. Within it is the power of the higher and the lower, for it has acquired the light of lights, and, therefore, darkness flees from it. This is the power of all powers which conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid. The origin of this work is according to the creation of the universe. This is my glory, and for this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus.[97]

Kraus is of the opinion that the cosmology and metaphysics presented in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa* ultimately have the "craft of nature" in mind, what Bahá'u'lláh usually refers to as the "hidden craft." In other words, the *Sirr al-Khalíqa* introduces the theoretical framework necessary for understanding and practicing the craft of nature. The Emerald Tablet itself teaches in veiled language how to produce the alchemical elixir, that which is born from a single thing, yet whose father is the sun and whose mother is the moon, which "conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid."

Bahá'u'lláh mentions or alludes to the hidden craft in about forty different tablets, and more may yet come to light.[98] In ten of these, he gives detailed explanations of its practice, explanations which depend for their proper interpretation upon correctly decoding the names used to describe different stages of the process. Bahá'u'lláh's descriptions of the hidden craft typically abound in metaphors, and he uses such terms as "sun" and "moon," "father" and "mother," and the members of the four elements mentioned above. Regarding the use of this metaphorical terminology, Bahá'u'lláh explains: "These various names are the protectors of this treasure of the One True Lord, that

the truth of it might remain hidden from the ignorant and preserved from the deceptive in heart."[99]

Baha'u'llah believed in the truth of the hidden craft. For example, he wrote to one of his followers: "This is that which has been called the hidden craft and the concealed secret by the tongues of the philosophers. By My life, assuredly it is a noble science. Whosoever God aids unto it and its knowledge shall become apprised of the secrets of creation and independent from all save God. He shall be confident in the power of his Lord and shall be of those who are well-assured."[100] In regard to the basic objective of the hidden craft, Baha'u'llah says: "In short, the object of the hidden craft is this: From one thing the four elements should be separated, and, after the purification of each of these elements from their non-essential drosses, these elements should be made one thing by dissolution and congelation."

Furthermore, Baha'u'llah explains: "If thou art able to separate anything in heaven or on earth and marry all of it together again, after purification, so that it becomes one thing, the secret of this great mystery will become clear to thee . . . for this principle has encompassed the contingent world and all created things both inwardly and outwardly."[101] Although these words may refer to a physical process that Baha'u'llah has in mind, they have a clear parallel in the process of spiritual transformation, both individually and collectively. Alchemy as a mirror for psychological or spiritual transformation has a long tradition, going back at least to the time of Zosimus (c. 300). For example, on an individual level, through suffering and life experience (separation), a human being can learn and grow, become purified from harmful habits or characteristics, and finally become a more integrated and whole person.

It is worth noting that in the same tablet in which Bahá'u'lláh praises the hidden craft, he dismisses other secret sciences (*'ulúm al-gharíba*): "Know that most of what thou hast heard about these sciences is such as doth not 'fatten nor appease the hunger', even were one to look attentively into them."[102]

Despite his endorsement of the hidden craft, Baha'u'llah prohibited his followers from engaging in it, except for one or two individuals who were probably also the recipients of most of the practical elixir tablets. To others who asked, Bahá'u'lláh's typical response was, as placed into the mouth of his secretary, Mírzá Áqá Jan: "Every soul desirous to work with this craft was forbidden by Him. He said: 'The

time for it has not come. Be patient until God brings it forth in His time'."[103] Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in prohibiting the practice of the hidden craft among his followers also appears to have been for their own protection, for he says: "Many who occupied themselves with the elixir and the science of divination lost their minds on account of their imaginings and the concentration of their thoughts, and evidences of insanity were observed in them."[104]

I know of only one other Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh that mentions a statement made by Hermes, though more such texts may come to light. In response to a Bahá'í, who was asking about the uncertainty of events and the inconstancy of the world, Baha'u'llah responded:

> The world has never had nor does it now possess stability (*thabát*), notwithstanding the complaints of some unfaithful and wavering souls. But, in truth, whatever takes place is well-pleasing, for the divine wisdom has ordained it. Without His command and will, not a leaf can stir, and whatever occurs is conformable to wisdom. All must be contented with it, nay eagerly desire it. However, in some cases, such as when the sweetness of reunion [with God] gives way to the bitterness of separation and, likewise, when, by the decree of remoteness, nearness and meeting are banished-this causes sighs of sorrow and grief to be upraised and the tears to flow. Otherwise, the matter is as some of the philosophers have cited from the words of Idrís [Hermes]: "It is impossible for the realm of creation to be better than it already is."[105]

In addition to its mention of Hermes/Idrís, this passage is important in itself in regard to the question of God's determinism versus human free will. This theme is discussed in many other Bahá'í texts, which indicate that it is not a question of one or the other, but of both.[106] In other words, God's predestination of things and human free will work together to effect the outcome of history. What God has predestined is the laws of nature, such that necessary cause and effect relationships exist between all created things. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "For example, God hath created a relation between the sun and the terrestrial globe that the rays of the sun should shine and the soil should yield. These relationships constitute predestination, and the manifestation thereof in the plane of existence is fate. Will is that active force which controlleth these relationships and these incidents."[107] This is why Baha'u'llah states that "without His command and will not a leaf can stir." The natural relationships existing between things are according to God's perfect wisdom, such that the

universe cannot be better than it is, as given by Hermes. In other words, the determinism evident in the laws of nature is due to their perfection, and God does not change what is already perfect, although possessing the power to do so.[108]

Since human beings are part of the web of life, they too cause events and receive the effects of events. But unlike other creatures who live perforce in harmony with nature's laws, human beings have a choice in observing these laws, insofar as they include ethical and spiritual principles meant to guide human actions. In other words, the circumstances that affect human beings during the course of life are part of the web of predestination, but how we choose to react to circumstances is not determined.

Human free will is also created in accord with the wisdom and love of God and, like everything else, it receives the power to act from the Primal Will of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the condition of the human will to the captain of a ship who is able to turn the ship in whatever direction he wishes, but is dependent on the power of wind or steam to move the ship. This wind or steam is analogous to the Will of God and without it a human being cannot carry out either good or evil actions.[109] In sum, human beings and natural phenomena are secondary agents that directly effect the course of history, whereas God's Will is the necessary cause sustaining the existence of these secondary agents, and giving them the power to act.

The Hermetic writings describe a similar picture of determinism and free will. Human beings must choose to act, but may act either morally or like brutes. It is in this context only (the spirit) that Hermes indicated that human beings can achieve freedom from destiny.[110] The body, however, was always regarded as held by the chains of multiple causes. The Alexandrian alchemist Zosimus refers to Hermes' book *On Natural Dispositions,* in which Hermes condemns those who seek to evade fate for self-aggrandizing reasons:

> Hermes calls such people mindless, only marchers swept along in the procession of fate, with no conception of anything incorporeal, and with no understanding of fate itself, which conducts them justly. Instead they insult the instruction it gives through corporeal experience, and imagine nothing beyond the good fortune it grants.[111]

## CONCLUSION

From the foregoing it is evident that the Hermetic tradition is relevant to Bahá'í studies in several ways. For example, Baha'u'llah refers to Balínús as one who discerned the mysteries of creation "which lie enshrined in the Hermetic writings."[112] Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on creation in his Lawh-i Ḥikmat are seen to correspond very closely to the theory of creation contained in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa*.

A comparison of Bahá'í alchemy texts with the Emerald Tablet of Hermes and other alchemy texts is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the principles alluded to in the Emerald Tablet resemble statements made by Baha'u'llah on the same subject. Likewise, a comparison of Jábir's alchemy writings, which rely heavily on Hermetic sources, with Baha'i alchemy texts will no doubt reveal many specific parallels.

The philosophical-theological texts of the Hermetica will likely prove a more fruitful ground for comparison, due to their strong Platonic tendency and their close connection to religious doctrines found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religious scholars from each of these religions, especially during the Middle Ages, held Hermes in high regard for this very reason. The Hermetic position on human will and fate, however briefly touched upon, is seen to have an affinity to the corresponding Baha'i teachings.

Lastly, as a corollary issue, what attitude should Bahá'ís take toward Bahá'u'lláh's references to Hermes and Balínús in view of the declared infallibility of Bahá'í scripture? In my opinion, there are two possible perspectives for Bahá'ís to take. The first is to accept a non-metaphorical statement given in revelation as factually true, by virtue of the authority invested in the Manifestation of God, even though by the standard of current academic scholarship it is considered improbable. (This, of course, does not include passages that are obviously meant to be interpreted symbolically according to the standard given by Baha'u'llah in the Kitáb-i Íqán.)

For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches categorically that Socrates journeyed to Palestine and Syria and there learned the doctrines of the unity of God and the immortality of the human soul from the Jewish divines. He continues that "this is authentic" even though it "cannot be found in the Jewish histories."[113] When Shoghi Effendi was asked about the discrepancy between this position and current

views in Greek historiography, he answered: "We have no historical proof of the truth of the Master's statement regarding the Greek philosophers visiting the Holy Land, etc. but such proof may come to light through research in the future."[114] Shoghi Effendi does not compromise the Bahá'í principle of the essential harmony existing between science, as a method of acquiring truth about reality, and religion, as a vehicle of inspired knowledge, but he does deny the correctness of a particular modern historical perspective. The difference in conclusions depends on the initial premises. Because of lack of historical evidence, those who do not recognize the possibility of a divine source for historical knowledge logically deduce that Socrates did not acquire any of his theories from Jewish divines.

If this first perspective is applied to Baha'u'llah's statements about Hermes and Balinus, then the believer will accept as factual that Hermes was a real individual of great antiquity whose historicity has been lost in the mists of legend, and view the Hermetica not as mere syncretistic creations of the early Roman empire, but as authentic, albeit Hellenized, descendants of Egyptian religious doctrines originating with Thoth, doctrines which were later discovered and propagated by Balinus and accepted by the philosophers who followed Balinus in the Hermetic tradition.

How does this position hold up against the findings of modern scholarship in the field of Hermetic studies? First, let us look at Baha'u'llah's assertion that Hermes was "the first person who devoted himself to philosophy." There is no historical evidence by which this statement can be proved or disproved. Rather, it is an assertion that can only be accepted on the authority of Baha'u'llah and the Hermetic textual tradition preceding Bahá'u'lláh. The modern dating of the earliest philosophical Hermetic texts from the late first to the late third centuries is not contrary to anything Baha'u'llah has stated since Baha'u'llah only affirms the great antiquity of Hermes, not the texts associated with his name. As for Bahá'u'lláh's statement that Balinus "derived his knowledge and sciences from the Hermetic Tablets," this is seemingly more problematic because Hermes is not mentioned in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius,* where he should be mentioned if Apollonius/Balínús gained his knowledge from the Hermetic texts. However, in view of the fact that Philostratus' biography is considered to be unreliable as a historical source by most modern scholars of the subject, we should not be surprised if Philostratus has left out many crucial details about Apollonius' life and sources of

inspiration. Since nothing in Baha'u'llah's account of Hermes and Balínús can be shown to be in opposition to historical facts, there is no reason why Bahá'ís should not accept Baha'u'llah's statements, in this case, as factually intended.[115] The statements, however, are also not verified by known historical facts.

The second perspective, which it is possible for Bahá'ís to take in the absence of an authoritative statement in Baha'i scriptures stating that a certain revealed passage is to be understood literally as stated, is for the believer to adopt a more broadly contextual view of particular statements embedded in revelation. Juan Cole has taken the position that some statements embedded in revelation, such as Baha'u'llah's quotation from Shahrastani that "Empedocles . . . was a contemporary of David, while Pythagoras lived in the days of Solomon," are "factually inaccurate by any standards of reasoning and historical documentation available to contemporary historians," while at the same time these statements do not invalidate "the central propositions contained in the Tablet of Wisdom."[116] In other words, Baha'u'llah's intention in revealing these statements is what is essential, not the historical accounts themselves. The Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf, states: "The fact that Baha'u'llah makes such statements [the historical accounts in the Lawh-i Ḥikmatl, for the sake of illustrating the spiritual principles that He wishes to convey, does not necessarily mean that He is endorsing their historical accuracy."[117]

This view focuses on the Baha'i principle of the relativity of religious truth, according to which religious teachings, as given by the prophets, are suited particularly to the age in which they appear and are colored by the traditions and thoughts of the people living in the time of the prophet. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that earlier prophets referred to the seven celestial spheres (or heavens) of the Ptolemaic cosmos without trying to correct people's perceptions by explaining to them the true structure of the universe. "Such references," he explains, "were dictated by the conventional wisdom prevailing in those times, for every cycle has its own characteristics which are determined by the capacities of the people."[118] Baha'u'llah likewise refers to the "fourth heaven" of the early astronomers without explanation in the Kitab-i Íqán because this book, according to Shoghi Effendi, "was revealed for the guidance of that sect [the Shí'ah]," where "this term was used in conformity with the concepts of its followers."[119]

In the same way, the tablets of Baha'u'llah mentioning Hermes and Balinus were addressed to individuals who were familiar with the Islamic Hermetic tradition, which was particularly strong in Iran. Within such a milieu, it would be reasonable for Baha'u'llah to use this tradition, without regard for its historical accuracy, to support the teaching he wished to convey. In the Lawh-i Ḥikmat, for example, Bahá'u'lláh is intent on affirming, through his accounts of certain Greek philosophers, their ultimate dependence upon the inspiration of the prophets (particularly the doctrine of monotheism) as the only basis for developing an accurate system of metaphysics. The theories of these philosophers, in turn, had a significant impact on the development of Western civilization. He says:

> Consider Greece. We made it a Seat of Wisdom for a prolonged period. . . .
> Although it is recognized that the contemporary men of learning are highly qualified in philosophy, arts and crafts, yet were anyone to observe with a discriminating eye he would readily comprehend that most of this knowledge hath been acquired from the sages of the past, for it is they who have laid the foundation of philosophy, reared its structure and reinforced its pillars. Thus doth thy Lord, the Ancient of Days, inform thee. The sages aforetime acquired their knowledge from the Prophets, inasmuch as the latter were the Exponents of divine philosophy and the Revealers of heavenly mysteries. Men quaffed the crystal, living waters of Their utterance, while others satisfied themselves with the dregs.120

Since, from the second perspective, the accuracy of the historical details about Hermes and Balinus set forth by Baha'u'llah is not essential to the intention of the text, those details may be dispensed with, or regarded as insignificant. In regard to Bahá'u'lláh's words in the Lawh-i Ḥikmat that Empedocles and Pythagoras were contemporaries of David and Solomon, Shoghi Effendi advises: "We must not take this statement too literally."[121] The comparison made earlier in this paper, however, between the cosmology of Balinus in the *Sirr al-Khalíqa* and the cosmology of Baha'u'llah in the Lawh-i Ḥikmat demonstrates that (historical views aside) Baha'u'llah considers Hermes and Balinus to be true sources of knowledge about the secrets of creation. He agrees with certain ideas that tradition says they supported, and he used them as examples within a culture that recognized them in order to support his own teachings.

## NOTES

1. Bahá'u'lláh, ***Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas*** (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) p. 148.

***2. Tablets of Baha'u'llah,*** p. 148n. In the final sentence of this passage in the Persian it is not clear whether the antecedent of the pronoun is Hermes or Balínús. The sentence literally reads: "Most of the philosophers made their philosophical and scientific discoveries from the words and statements of that blessed being ***(ha&at).***" It is clear, though, that Bahá'u'lláh intends Hermes as the ancient source from which many philosophers derived their inspiration, and Balínús was the first to discover the Hermetic wisdom after it had been concealed for a long period of time.

3. Cited in L. Kakosy, "Problems of the Thoth-Cult in Roman Egypt," *Acta* ***Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae,*** Vol. 15 (1963) p. 124; see also Garth Fowden, ***The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) pp. 22-31 for the evolution of Hermes Trismegistus from Thoth.

4. Plato, ***Phaedrus*** 274d.

5. Ibid., 274c.

6. Kákosy, "Problems of the Thoth-Cult."

7. Kákosy, "Problems of the Thoth-Cult," p. 125.

***8.*** Fowden, ***Egyptian Hermes,*** p. 23.

9. Fowden, ***Egyptian Hermes,*** p. 23.

10. Walter Scott, ***Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophical Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus,*** Vol. 1 (Boston: Shambhala, 1985) pp. 4-5.

11. Plato, *Philebus* 18b.

12. Ammianus Marcellinus, ***The Later Roman Empire*** *(A.D. 354–378)* sel. and trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p. 228.

13. Cited in Jack Lindsay, ***The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt (New*** York: Barnes & Noble, 1970) p. 107.

14. For this view that Bahá'u'lláh may be consciously and deliberately selecting from the Hermetic tradition only those parts that he regards to be true, I owe a great debt of thanks to Wendy Heller. She has pointed out the dangers of trying to interpret Bahá'u'lláh's words by reference to historical context alone: "Bahá'u'lláh often infuses new meanings into traditional concepts and terms through his usage of them. The prophet, above all, is not bound by the conventional thought that characterizes any historical era, but often radically challenges and corrects it." (Personal communication to the author).

15. Jonathan Barnes, ***Early Greek Philosophy*** (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) p. 15.

16. Lactantius, ***The Divine Institutes,*** trans. Sister Mary F. McDonald (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964) I,, p. vi.

17. Augustine, *The City of God* in *Great Books of the Western World,* Vol. 18, trans. Marcus Dods (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952) Book 8, p. 23. Book 8, Chapters 23 through 26 contain Augustine's ideas about Hermes.

18. See Walter Scott, *Hermetica.* Scott's commentary on the Hermetica is contained in volumes 2-3, while the testimonia, addenda, and indices are in volume 4.

19. Andre-Jean Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, *4* vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1944-54); and Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

20. Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes,* pp. 8-9.

21. Ibid., p. 10.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., p. 11; *see* also Scott, *Hermetica,* vol. 1, pp. 9–10.

24. Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes,* p. 198.

25. John Scarborough, "Hermetic and Related Texts in Classical Antiquity," *Hermeticism and the Renaissance,* ed. by I. Merkel and A. G. Debus (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988) p. 22.

*26. Abammonis Ad Porphyrium Responsum* and Scott's notes on this text in *Hermetica,* vol. 4, pp. 40-102.

27. William C. Grese, "Magic in Hellenistic Hermeticism" in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance,* p. 45.

28. Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes,* p. xv. For example, J. P. Mahé, a professor of Armenian, sees a connection between the philosophical Hermetica and the earlier Egyptian Wisdom literature in *Hermès en Haute-Egypte* (Quebec: [publisher?], 1978-1982); also Eric Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1984).

29. Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes,* p. 102.

30. Iamblichus refers to the "way of Hermes" in his response to Porphyry, *Mysteriis* viii, 4–5, cited in Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes,* p. 96.

31. "The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth," *The Nag Hammadi Library in English,* gen. ed. James M. Robinson (New York Harper Collins, 1990) p. 326.

*32. Corpus Hermeticurn* vii; i.27; x.8; and xiii.7, 8. This and the following references to the *C.H.* are from Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes,* chapter four, pp. 105-12.

33. Ibid. *C.H.* i.31; x.4, 15; and *Asclepius* 41.

34. Ibid. *C.H.* xiii.

35. Ibid. *C.H.* x.19.

36. Ibid. *C.H.* ii.17 and iii.3.

37. See Maria Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History,* trans. Piotr Pienkowski (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1986) pp. 32-38, 185.

38. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana,* 2 vols., trans. F. C. Conybeare (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912) i.2, 3.

39. See Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana,* Chapter 1, on problems with Philostratus' reliability as a historian and arguments that Damis is a fictitious figure.

40. Ibid., p. 14.

41. See D. H. Raynor, "Moerangenes and Philostratus: Two Views of Apollonius of Tyana," *Classical Quarterly,* Vol. 34 (1984) p. 223.

42. Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana,* p. 86.

43. Ibid., pp. 149–50.

44. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius,* iv.44.

45. Ibid., iv.45.

46. Ibid., vol. 2, "The Treatise of Eusebius."

47. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes,* V, iii-iv.

48. Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana,* pp. 157-58.

49. Cited in Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana,* p. 101.

50. Ibid., pp. 101-102.

51. Ibid., p. 108.

52. Ibid., p. 110.

53. *The Letters of Apollonius of Tyana,* trans. Robert J. Penella (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979) letter no. 44.

54. Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana,* p. 140.

55. Cited in G. R. S. Mead, *Apollonius of Tyana: The Philosophical Explorer and Social Reformer of the First Century A.D.* (London, 1901) pp. 153-54.

56. *Letters of Apollonius,* no. 54.

57. Ibid., no. 58.

58. J. W. Fück, "The Arabic Literature on Alchemy According to an-Nadim," *Ambix* (Feb. 1951) p. 93.

59. Paul Kraus, *Jábir ibn Ḥayyán: Contribution à l'Histoire des Idées Scientifiques dans l'Islam,* vol. 2 (Paris: Société d'Édition les Belles Lettres, 1986) p. 282.

60. Syed Nomanul Haq, *Names, Natures and Things: The Alchemist Jábir ibn Ḥayyan and his Kitáb al-Aḥjár* (Book of Stones) Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 158 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994) p. 15.

61. Ibid., chapter 1.

62. See F. E. Peters, *Allah's Commonwealth: A History of Islam in the Near East, 600-1100 A.D. (New* York: Simon & Shuster, 1973) pp. 273-74. In Islam, there is also a tradition of three different Hermeses. Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a records this tradition as he borrows it from the astronomer Abú Ma'shar al-Balkhi: "There were three Hermeses. As for the first Hermes . . the Persians call him Hóshang, which means the Just. . . The Persians say that his grandfather was Kayómarth, that is Adam. The Hebrews say that he is Akhnúkh (Enoch) Idris in Arabic. Abú Ma'shar said: He was the first man to talk about such things as the motions of the stars. . . . He was the first man

to build temples and praise God in them; the first person to study the science of medicine and talk about it. . He was the first man to give warning of the Flood, and he foresaw the advent on earth of a great catastrophe coming from the skies by fire and water. He resided in Upper Egypt. . . . As for the second Hermes, he was one of the Babylonians. He lived in the city of the Chaldeans, in Babel. He lived after the Flood. . . He excelled in medicine and in philosophy and he knew the nature of numbers. Pythagoras, the arithmetician was his pupil. This Hermes revived what was lost of medicine, philosophy and the art of numbers in the Flood, in Babel. . . . As for the third Hermes, he lived in the city of Misr, and he came after the Flood. He is the author of the book about venomous animals. He was a physician and a philosopher, and he knew the nature of deadly medicines and harmful animals. . He wrote a beautiful and valuable book about alchemy which is related to many crafts, such as the making of glass, glass objects, clay and the like. He had a disciple, by the name of Asklepios, who lived in Syria." (Quoted in A. Fodor, "The Origins of the Arabic Legends of the Pyramids," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 23* [1970] pp. 336–37)

63. An interesting study by Birger A. Pearson shows that the Poimandres of Hermes and a Jewish document, 2 *Enoch*, probably originating from first-century Egypt, have numerous, specific parallels such that either one could be borrowing from the other or both derive from a common, earlier source. ("Jewish Elements in Corpus Hermeticurn I [Poimandres]" in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions,* ed. by R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 19811)

64. Quoted in Scott, *Hermetica,* vol. 4, (Testimonia) p. 255.

65. Quoted in A. E. Affifi, "The Influence of Hermetic Literature on Moslem Thought," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* Vol. 13 (1951) pp. 842-43.

66. Quoted in Scott, *Hermetica,* vol. 4 (Testimonia) p. 248.

67. Regarding Hermetic writings in Arabic, an-Nadim lists twenty-two treatises of Hermes in his *Fihrist* (Catalog) thirteen on alchemy, four on theurgy, and five on astrology. Only a few of these remain intact such as the *Kitab Qarátís al-ḥakím, Kitab al-Ḥabíb, Kitab at-Tankalush,* and *Kitáb al-Masmumat Shánáq.* For a fuller treatment of Hermetic texts, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr's chapter "Hermes and Hermetic Writings in the Islamic World" in his *Islamic Studies* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1967) pp. 63-89.

68. Balínús, *Sirr al-Khaliqa wa San'at at-Tabi'at (Kitab al-'Ilal)* ed. Ursula Weisser (Aleppo, Syria: University of Aleppo, 1979) p. 100.

69. H. E. Stapleton, G. L. Lewis, and F. Sherwood Taylor, "The Sayings of Hermes Quoted in the *Ma' al- Waraqi* of Ibn Umail," *Ambix* (April 1949) pp. 69-90.

*70.* Scott, *Hermetica,* vol. 4, pp. 280-81.

71. Quoted in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Studies,* p. 69.

72. Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana,* pp. 104–105.

*73.* Kraus, *Jabir ibn Hayyan,* pp. 293-94.

74. Ibid., p. 295.

75. Julius Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Hermetischen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätisbuchhandlung, 1926) pp. 72, 79.

*76.* Kraus, *Jabir ibn Hayyan,* p. 298, and *Encyclopedia of Islam,* new edition, vol. 1, p. 995.

77. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets,* pp. 14748.

78. Balínús, *Sirr al-Khaliqa,* pp. 2, 51. Baha'u'llah explains in the *Lawḥ-i Ḥikmat* that he has not discovered these sayings by perusing books as other men do: "Thou knowest full well that We perused not the books which men possess and We acquired not the learning current amongst them, and yet whenever We desire to quote the sayings of the learned and the wise, presently there will appear before the face of thy Lord in the form of a tablet all that which hath appeared in the world and is revealed in the Holy Books and Scriptures. Thus do We set down in writing that which the eye perceiveth. Verily His knowledge encompasseth the earth and the heavens." *(Tablets,* p. 149)

79. See Juan Cole, "Problems of Chronology in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom," *World Order* (Spring 1979) pp. 24-39. Also see note 78 above on the manner in which Baha'u'llah says he acquired this information.

80. Balínús, *Sirr al-Khaltqa,* pp. 101-103.

81. *Tablets,* pp. 14041.

82. Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975) p. 6.

*83. Tablets,* p. 142.

84. See Keven Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective on the Origin of Matter," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies,* vol. 2, no. 3 (1990) p. 24.

85. Baha'u'llah states: "The cause of motion has ever been heat, and the cause of heat is the Word of God," from Persian text in Vahid Ra'fati, "Lawh-i Ḥikmat: Fá'ilayn va Munfa'ilayn," *'Andalíb,* vol. 5, no. 19 (1986) p.36.

86. Balínús, *Sirr al-Khaliqa,* p. 104.

*87. Tablets,* p. 140.

88. See Keven Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective," pp. 1544, where this thesis is more fully treated.

89. Baha'u'llah, *Áthár-i Qalam A'lá,* vol. 7, p. 113.

90. Quṭb al-Din Shírází, the thirteenth-century commentator of Surawardi, explains: "Therefore, it is established that the intent of the sages is that the lords of species (*arbáb al-naw'*) are not the individualized forms of the images (*asnám*). Nay, rather the species lord is the model (*mithál*) of the image (*ṣanam*) in the world of intellect, just as the image with all of its accidents is its likeness in the world of sense." (Quoted by Aḥmad ibn Harawi, *Anwariyya,* ed. Hossein Ziai [Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1358] p. 40)

91. Bahá'u'lláh, *Má'idiy-i Ásmání*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 129 B.E.) p. 82.

92. That the four elements were thought of as primary states of matter by the ancient philosophers is evident from Plato's frequent use of the term "kind" or "genus" as a synonym for "element" in the *Timaeus* 53a–57d, so that earth includes all solids, water all liquids, and so forth. Baghdad, one of the Muslim Mutakallimún, also uses the term "genus" (*jins*) for element. He says: "For example, earth loses density and changes into water, as with salt when it is dissolved, and water in some places freezes and becomes a stone, although it is from the genus of earth." (*Uṣúlu'd-Dín* [Istanbul, 19281 p. 54)

*93. Tablets,* pp. 141-42.

*94. Má'idiy-i Ásmání*, vol. 1, pp. 54-55.

*95. See The Arabic Works of Jábir ibn Hayyán*, ed. E. J. Holmyard, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, 1928) pp. 90, 104.

96. Balínús, *Sirr al-Khalíqa*, p. 7. There is another story in Philostratus (viii, 19-20) where Apollonius enters a cave at the temple of Trophonius in Greece to visit its oracle, declaring that his purpose is "in the interests of philosophy." After seven days, he returns to his companions, carrying a book of philosophy supposedly conformable to the teachings of Pythagoras. Philostratus says that this book, along with the letters of Apollonius, was later entrusted to the care of the emperor Hadrian and kept in his palace at Antium.

97. Ibid., pp. 524-25.

98. The published Bahá'í alchemy texts, or texts which mention alchemy, may be found in the following sources: (1) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 197-98, 200; (2) Kitáb-i Íqán, pp. 157, 186-90; (3) *Má'diy-i Ásmání*, vol. 1, pp. 19-20, 24-57; vol. *3*, p. 15; vol. 4, pp *77-85; (4) Amr va Khalq*, vol. 3, pp. 350-58; and (5) *Asráru'l Áthár* (letter *alif*) pp. 207–208. In addition to these published sources, several of which contain textual errors and ommisions, a number of unpublished Baha'i alchemy texts are held at the International Bahá'í Archives.

*99. Má'idiy-i Ásmání*, vol. 1, p. 30.

100. From an unpublished tablet of Bahá'u'lláh in the International Bahá'í Archives.

101. From two unpublished tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in the International Baha'i Archives.

102. Ibid. Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains what these secret sciences are in Chapter 9 of his *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (World of Islam Festival Publishing Co., 1976): "Besides the 'open' and 'accessible' sciences . . . the Islamic sciences include a category called the hidden (*khafiyyah*) or occult (*gharíbah*) sciences, which have always remained 'hidden', both in the content of their teachings and in the manner of gaining accessibility to them, because of their very nature. . . Although dozens in number, the occult sciences were classified in the famous compendium of Husayn 'Ah Wá'iz al-Káshifí into the

***five*** sciences of *kímiyá'* (alchemy) *límiyá'* (magic) *hímiyá'* (the subjugating of souls) *símiyá'* (producing visions) and *rímiyá'* (jugglery and tricks). The first letter of the five words together form the words ***kulluhu sirr,*** which means, 'they are all secret'. The texts on the occult sciences contain numerous other branches. Probably the most popular of the occult sciences was ***jufr,*** dealing with the numerical value of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and said to have been first cultivated by 'Ah ibn Abi Tálib. It is used to this day for purposes ranging from interpreting the opening letters of the verses of the Holy Qur'án to casting evil spells. Almost as widespread is ***raml,*** or geomancy, which is said to have come down from the Prophet Daniel. Although it originally made use of pebbles of sand, special instruments were later devised with various squares and dots from which future events are prognosticated."

103. Baha'u'llah in ***Amr va Khalq***, vol. 3 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 122B.E.) p. 355.

104. Ibid., p. 353.

105. From an unpublished tablet of Bahá'u'lláh in the International Bahá'í Archives.

106. An example of a Bahá'í text that emphasizes the importance of free will is the following: "All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth. . . .Men, however, have wittingly broken His law. Is such a behavior to be attributed to God, or to their proper selves? Be fair in your judgment. Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves." (Baha'u'llah, ***Gleanings from the Writings of*** *Bahá'u'lláh* [Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 19801 p. 149)

107. 'Abdu'l-Baha, ***Selections from the Writings of*** *'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1978) p. 198.

108. On the question of theodicy in Islam, see E. L. Ormsby, ***Theodicy in Islamic Thought*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

109. 'Abdu'l-Baha, ***Some Answered Questions,*** p. 249.

110. ***Corpus Hermeticum*** XII(i)7 in Scott, ***Hermetica.***

111. Zosimos quoted in Fowden, ***Egyptian Hermes,*** p. 123.

112. Bahá'u'lláh, ***Tablets,*** p. 148.

113. 'Abdu'l-Baha, ***Selections from the Writings,*** p. 55. See also 'Abdu'l-Baha, ***The Secret of Divine Civilization*** (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) p. 77.

114. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 15 February 1947, published in ***Unfolding Destiny*** (London: British Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 445. The Bahá'í Faith also accepts some events as factually true, such as the virgin birth of Jesus by means of the Spirit of God, even though they go against the laws of nature. The principle of the harmony between science and religion is, once again, not compromised, according to Baha'is, because God is a higher principle than the laws of nature. As "the Father of the Universe,

[God] can, in His wisdom and omnipotence, bring about any change, no matter how temporary, in the operation of the laws which He himself created." (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 27 February 1938, published in *Bahá'í References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam,* comp. James Heggie [Oxford: George Ronald, 1986] p. 143).

115. In a tablet written to Mrs. Ethel Rosenberg in 1906, 'Abdu'l-Baha indicates that Baha'u'llah's accounts of the philosophers in the Lawh-i Ḥikmat are to be taken as factually correct, for he states: "How many historical questions were deemed settled in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century the opposite was proved true. Hence, the sayings of the historians and the accounts prior to Alexander the Great, even the dates of the lives of important persons, cannot be relied upon. Be not surprised, therefore, at the difference between the contents of the *Tablet of Wisdom* and the texts of the historians. It is necessary to examine carefully the great disparities existing among the various historians and historical accounts, because the historians of the East and the historians of the West differ greatly. *The Tablet of Wisdom* was written in accordance with some of the histories of the East. . . . The firm basis of reality is the Divine Universal Manifestation of God. After He has established the truth, whatever He says is correct." (*Má'idiy-i Ásmání,* vol. 2, pp. 65, 67)

The second perspective given in the conclusion to this paper, namely that the historical accuracy of the accounts revealed by Bahá'u'lláh is tangential to his primary purpose, should not be considered as contradictory to the view given here by 'Abdu'l-Baha. The second perspective holds that whether the historical accounts are accurate or not is insignificant compared to Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in revealing them.

116. Juan Cole, "Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom," *World Order,* Vol. 13, no. 3 (Spring 1979) pp. 38, 39.

117. Letter of 3 November 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual.

118. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Min Makátíb-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá,* vol. 1 (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bahá'í Brasil, 1982) p. 53.

119. Quoted in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 3 November 1987.

120. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets,* pp. 144-45, 149-50.

121. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted by Juan Cole in "Problems of Chronology," p. 37n.

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF EXISTENTIAL THEISM FOR BAHÁ'Í THEOLOGY

*J. A. McLean*

Although rooted in antiquity, modern existentialism is an intellectual movement that first took shape in the nineteenth century and came to prominence in the post-World War II period. John Macquarrie has detailed the broad-spectrum influence of existentialism not only on theology, philosophy, and literature but also on a variety of areas in the arts, education, and culture.1 As a much compressed background to this paper, it might be useful to distinguish at the outset four general modes within existentialism. These modes have all borrowed from, reacted to, and influenced one another, so the divisions are in no way complete. (Even theists and atheists share common concerns in existentialism, although the treatment, as we might expect, is different.)

First, there is the theistic existentialism founded by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who is the ancestral figure for post-World War II existentialists, whether believing or atheistic.2 Pre-dating Kierkegaard, one can recognize existential moods in the Book of Job, the Psalmist, Ecclesiastes, and in Augustine and Pascal. Indeed, existential theism finds its most ancient roots in the human condition itself, as reflected in the Greek myths of estrangement and loss and the Genesis account of the exile of humanity's original parents from Eden with its everafter estrangement from self. Second, there are the philosophical existentialists such as Sartre, Jaspers, and Heidegger who are considered to be the founders of post-World War II existential

philosophy.3 Third, there is the literary existentialism of writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Sartre, a literature that tends to be dark and pessimistic about human motives and the ability of the individual to overcome psychological conflict and live happily. Sartre and Camus completely exploded the possibility of a positive or joyful existence when they pointed to an absurdity inherent in the human condition.4 This literature is to be contrasted with the more positive implications for interpersonal relations of Heidegger's ***Besorgen*** / ***Fürsorge***[5] (concern/solicitude) and Buber's I-Thou,[6] or Gabriel Marcel's *"métaphysique de l'espoir"* (metaphysic of hope).[7] Fourth, there is the school of existential psychiatry and psychology, founded by the Swiss psychiatrists Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) and Medard Boss (b. 1903), which has a strong philosophical flavor and which has markedly influenced such writers as Rollo May, Eric Fromm, and Viktor Frankl. Even though American experimental psychology worked hard to divest itself of the influence of the philosophical overtones of European existentialist thought, the existentialist outlook has found a responsive chord in English-speaking readers of psychology, particularly in North America.8

## KIERKEGAARD AND THE RELEVANCE OF EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES OF RELIGION

In his polemic against Hegelian philosophers during the last century,[9] Kierkegaard made a point that is relevant to the present state of Bahá'í studies. He argued that the speculative philosophers with their categories, finality, systematization, and historicization of religious phenomena had failed to deal with the most crucial issues in Christianity: the meaning of suffering, anxiety, and despair, peace of mind, faith and doubt, hope, happiness, and spiritual rebirth. We may also well ask, as Kierkegaard did, where did such a vital reality as divine love fit into the philosophers' schemes? Although Kierkegaard created his own highly individualistic metaphysical worldview, which was in part indebted to the speculative idealism he so strongly criticized, he was surely correct in his observation that the philosophical systems of his day for the most part bracketed the most real and urgent of human questions.

In a passage loaded with the irony interspersed throughout his writings, Kierkegaard leveled against philosophy the criticism that

speculation amounted to a desertion of existence. Philosophy made one immortal indeed, Kierkegaard wrote, but in the same way that the doctor with his medicine expels the fever but kills the patient. His statement is a cogent example of what he viewed as the most serious lacunae of philosophy vis-a-vis the concrete problems of human existence. It is difficult to deny Kierkegaard's affirmation that the individual is "infinitely interested in existing," whereas speculative philosophy, he is telling us, does not address the real questions of human existence:

> Now if we assume that abstract thought is the highest manifestation of human activity, it follows that philosophy and philosophers proudly desert existence, leaving the rest of us to face the worst. . . . [Philosophy] is disinterested; but the difficulty inherent in existence constitutes the interest of the existing individual, who is infinitely interested in existing. Abstract thought thus helps with respect to my immortality by first annihilating me as a particular existing individual and then making me immortal, about as when the doctor Holbert killed the patient with his medicine-but also expelled the fever.10

It was not speculation that interested the religious subject, Kierkegaard maintained, but rather eternal happiness:

> The subject is in passion infinitely interested in his eternal happiness, and is now supposed to receive assistance from speculation, i.e., by himself philosophizing. But in order to philosophize he must proceed in precisely the opposite direction, giving himself up and losing himself in objectivity, thus vanishing from himself.11

What Kierkegaard criticizes here is the annihilation of the religious subject in the objective question. His statement suggests rather the discovery of spiritual selfhood through experience and discourse.

While the Western Baha'i community still awaits the emergence of grand systematising philosophers or theologians,[12] Kierkegaard's point is pertinent to the current preoccupations of Baha'i scholars of religion working in Bahá'í history, exegesis, and theology, the three main sub-disciplines thus far defining Baha'i studies of religion. While these three disciplines have opened up instructive avenues in Baha'i studies, they remain nonetheless bound by content orientation rather than process. By content orientation I mean that the Bahá'í Faith is basically apprehended by the scholar as an independent collection of data to be researched and explicated in an original manner. While

content orientation is basic to scholarship and valid in its own right, its virtue masks a defect that weakens its effectiveness for the personal dimensions of religious studies. Such an approach, if pursued exclusively, neglects *'ilm-i vújúdí*[13] (the knowledge of being/existence) which has profound implications for a living philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie)* or *le vécu,* the lived experience of the individual.

I argue that Baha'i theology should retain as one of its major tasks the elucidation of spiritual *anthros* and the provision of meaning or insight into the "real life" of the individual. If Baha'i theology does not inspire the believer or shed light on personal dilemmas, raise consciousness, or provide insights into spiritual transformation, then it risks becoming identified with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's pointed critique of religion as "the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine"[14] and becoming mired in what he also referred to as ". . . thought that belongs to the world of thought alone."[15] The existential outlook I advocate here reflects, moreover, an indirect pastoral concern, but one that would be addressed through the discourse of philosophical theology rather than through homily or counselling. Such an approach with its potential diversity of worthwhile themes relating to concrete life issues would result in an aspiring synthesis of the real with the ideal.

## THE SCHOLAR AS PERSONA

Scholars generally speak through an objective/detached mode of discourse. Yet there is still much room for the scholar to speak through the subjective/engaged mode as a *persona* (Latin: mask; per=through + *sonus*=sound). The *persona* reflects the scholar's vision of the truth expressed in a characteristic voice of the experiencing subject who is as much an advocate of his personal vision as a detached analyst. The voice in the subjective/engaged mode would reflect the experiences and perceptions of the real self.[16] This move toward authenticity in scholarship would offer the reader the scholar/writer's experience of divine subjectivity in a spirit of intersubjective communion.

In the objective/detached content approach that has thus far characterized Bahá'í studies, however, the scholar is not transparent to the work, but has subjugated the self to the objective question under study. The individual is not present, so to speak. It is the question that predominates and the elucidation of the question is the main goal. When writing in the *persona* of spiritual self, however, one becomes a hermeneute in an interaction of both text and experience.

In this mode of writing, the author becomes more transparent to the reader and less subjugated to the dialectics of the objective idea. This form of exposition holds the potential for liberating the scholar/writer to move further along the path of creativity by placing the framework of interpretation within an interaction of sacred scripture and the scholar's individual spiritual perception. Put differently, the subjective/engaged mode allows the scholar to become largely the creator of one's own world of discourse.[17]

In this same vein, Rudolf Bultmann writes that it is a false notion to suppose that one has to suppress subjectivity and individuality in order to attain "objective knowledge":

> Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity, extinguish his individuality, if he is to attain objective knowledge. That requirement makes good sense only in so far as it is taken to mean that the interpreter has to silence his personal wishes with regard to the outcome of the interpretation. . . For the rest, unfortunately, the requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding. Such understanding presupposes precisely the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible development of his individuality.[18]

The question of commitment also crops up in the discussion of scholar as ***persona.*** The style of academic scholarship today requires an emotional distance of the self vis-à-vis the objective question. Indeed, in hard-edged scholarship, nuances of emotion are usually looked upon as being suspect, having no place in the cognitive milieu. Convention requires moreover that unless one is writing apologetics, the writer is not to openly avow commitment to the tradition in question—if one is committed to it—although this commitment may sometimes be presumed. And yet religion is all about a sense of commitment. One may consequently ask why, without it becoming shouting or the preaching of one who "clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause,"[19] a practice deprecated by Bahá'u'lláh, such a sense of commitment would be necessarily excluded. Existential theology makes it clear, however, that the scholar/writer is sitting inside the theological circle and is profoundly engaged not only in reflection but also in life itself.

When one raises the question of a scholar's commitment, one usually has to raise the flag of caution against dogmatism or preaching because there is always the fear and the danger of the one slipping

into the other. Karl Jaspers put it well, however, when he said: "Man can seek the path of his truth in unfanatical absoluteness, in a decisiveness which remains open."[20] In reality, this advocacy of the scholar as *persona*, as a subjective interpreter of the spiritual experience, flows naturally from a commitment to the acquisition of personal knowledge which is an aspiration to seek and find wisdom.

## A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE OF SOME DEFINING POINTS OF EXISTENTIAL THEISM

Some defining points of existential theism from a Bahá'í perspective are: (1) the engaged subject and spiritual passion in the search for truth; (2) living-in-the-world; (3) overcoming primordial alienation from God; (4) the personal mode in divine subjectivity; (5) the existential and the epiphanic moments; and (6) the realism of confronting self. These points will be considered in global fashion.21

In the search for truth, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá has called "the first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh"[22] and Shoghi Effendi a "primary duty,"[23] there is always a seeking subject. This seeking subject gives meaning to the spiritual world order, for without the truth-seeker there would be no application of spiritual principles or values in the world. Although truth may exist in other cosmological realms beyond our ken, as for the dimensions in which "we live, and move, and have our being,"[24] truth would not exist without its apprehension by the rational soul. It is only the rational soul that is capable of apprehending the truth in its depths, in its profoundest meaning.

Truth, then, cannot be confined merely to an objective body of data waiting to be discovered outside the seeker, for she or he is subjectively engaged *in* the truth-seeking process. Bearing this in mind, purely objective theological knowledge or judgment becomes a quasi-impossibility. The search for truth is rather a movement toward the depths of the center of being, what St. Paul called "the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians:10) In one sense, the seeker *is* the truth that is being sought. Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out:

> The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.25

This statement clearly points to the capacity of the self to understand both itself and the world once it has experienced transcendence. World understanding becomes possible with self-understanding. In this sense, the self becomes the vehicle or framework of interpretation for understanding the world. Self-understanding and world-understanding are inextricably linked. Put differently, the catalyst of divine revelation (Holy Word/Holy Spirit) will precipitate the perception of the truth that lies both within the seeker's own soul and the world. The seeker's truth does not lie consequently in a projected intellectual space outside the individual as a body of correct, objective, and static knowledge. Rather, the truth is revealed to the soul in ongoing fashion in a process of meaningful moments of search and discovery. According to this view, all knowledge is in some sense self-knowledge. For Kierkegaard, moreover, only to the extent that one's truth is internalized is one happy or unhappy: "The unhappy person is one who has his ideal, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, the essence of his being, in some manner outside of himself."[26]

The process of truth-seeking is nourished, moreover, by a spiritual attitude on the seeker's part of active zeal or passion, one that leaves no stone unturned. Even a desperate search would be preferable to the way of negative detachment, a detachment lacking the key ingredients of sincerity and spiritual passion. Kierkegaard made passion a positive element in the quest for truth, for it alone could confer certainty: "The conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones," he said in a memorable phrase. Another of his statements could well apply to the state of truth-seeking today: "What our age lacks is not reflection but passion."[27] In the Bahá'í Faith, however, truth-seeking is God-seeking, a thought that would be quite congruent with Kierkegaard. In his epistemology of divine Truth, Bahá'u'lláh makes spiritual passion a precondition of the search for God. This element of spiritual passion is not an irrational enemy of logic, as is sometimes supposed, but a co-rational, extra-rational, or super-rational dynamic of operational reality:

> Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubt and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.[28]

In a talk on "Baha'i Scholarship: Definitions and Perspectives," Moojan Momen refers to the key role played by passion in Baha'i epistemology: "I have never known an expert who was an impartial observer; the very fact that they [sic] are expert means that they have a passion about the subject. So it is illogical to consider them as impartial and dispassionate."[29] Momen thus links passion to expertise as one of its key ingredients. It would be illogical, according to this line of reasoning, not to have passion.

In *The Joyful Wisdom (Die Fröliche Wissenschaft),* Nietzsche, in his typically provocative and intense style, speaks of an age to come in which what he calls "preparatory men" will "carry heroism into the pursuit of knowledge."[30] Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche had understood that knowledge had to be pursued with an almost violent intensity:

> . . . men characterised by cheerfulness, patience, unpretentiousness, and contempt for all great vanities. . . . Soon the age will be past when you could be satisfied to live like shy deer, hidden in the woods! At long last the pursuit of knowledge will reach out for its due: it will want to *rule* and *own,* and you with it! . . . For, believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously!* Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors, as long as you cannot be rulers and owners, you lovers of knowledge![31]

The existential point of departure is the life of the solitary individual living or being in-the-world.[32] Existentialists hold that being, or more concretely, life itself (existence) rather than the world of the idea (essence> should become the object of reflection. Sartre says, for example: 'What they [existentialists] have in common is simply the fact that they believe *existence* comes before essence-r, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective."[33] His point is valid, for even if the essence is unknown, we *can* be sure of the empirical fact of our existence. Sartre was, of course, a representative of atheistic humanism, and so designated himself.[34] Consequently, for Sartre, this existence could not mean any other than human existence: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."[35]

In the Baha'i perspective, this *vécu* or *Existenz* of the believer, the lived experience, aims at transformation or insight, a shift in consciousness, or a deepening of the spirit of wisdom, dynamics that point

in large part to the great purposes of religion. This necessary connection between philosophy and life as *Lebensphilosphie* is what lies behind Ludwig Feuerbach's remark: "Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man . . . do not think as a thinker . . . think as a living, real being, think *in* existence.36 Feuerbach seems to be saying that it is life itself rather than speculation which provides the *materia bruta* for philosophy, a commonplace which we are apt to forget. This is suggested by his phrase "think *in* existence." Philosophy cannot be, then, a flight from the quotidian. Moreover, thought should reflect upon the concrete situation in order to gain its view of truth, for philosophy originated in reflections upon life's common experiences.

There is an inexorability about the life situation which cannot be escaped and which must be willingly embraced for both spiritual transformation and reflection in depth. On this theme Martin Buber writes:

> But he will not remove himself from the concrete situation as it actually is; he will, instead, enter into it, even if in the form of fighting against it. Whether field of work or field of battle, he accepts the place in which he is placed. He knows no floating of the spirit above concrete reality; to him even the sublimest spirituality is an illusion if it is not bound to the situation. Only the spirit which is bound to the situation is prized by him as bound to the *Pneuma,* the spirit of God.37

The life of the solitary individual in its relationship to the world is in Heidegger's word *Dasein,* our being-in-the-world, literally, our "being there" (*Da*=there, *Sein=to* be),[38] which suggests an openness, an availability or sensitivity to the emerging, unfolding world around us, or in Gabriel Marcel's word a *disponibilité* (availability) which "connotes openness, abandonment of self, welcoming" of persons and events and which, for Marcel, is an expression of hope.39 Existential theism does not, moreover, ignore or deny the malaise of the spiritual subject who is in some sense dislocated, or not whole, because he/she lives in a world that seems to contrive to impede both happiness and spiritual transformation. Writer-poet-theologian G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote amusingly about his own dislocation in the world which was resolved by a sudden shift of consciousness:

> The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do *not* fit in to the world. I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God. . . . The modern philosopher told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still

> felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the *wrong* place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring. . . . I knew now why grass has always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home.40

The ancient philosophers and prophets were well aware, of course, of our being dislocated in the world, and the existential view—although it did not come to be known by that name until the post-World War II period, and contrary to those who think of it strictly as an outgrowth of modern self-alienation and angst-is really an ancient perspective on the human condition. Paul Tillich, who defined himself as fifty-percent existentialist and fifty-percent essentialist,[41] points to the origins of existentialism in Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the human being finds himself or herself estranged from the knowledge of true self: "But Plato's existentialism appears in his myth of the human soul in prison, of coming down from the world of essences into the body which is its prison, and then being liberated from the cave."[42]

In a Bahá'í perspective, this overcoming of alienation from God and self involves the recovery of the supremely important belief in self as soul, for this conviction in the existence of the divine reality imparts the message of what Gabriel Marcel called "une métaphysique de l'espoir" (a metaphysic of hope):

> I spoke of the soul. This word, so long discredited, should here be given its priority once more. We cannot help seeing that there is the closest of connections between the soul and hope. I almost think that hope is for the soul what breathing is for the living organism. Where hope is lacking the soul dries up and withers, it is no more than a function, it is merely fit to serve as an object of study to a psychology that can never register anything but its location or absence. It is precisely the soul that is the traveller; it is of the soul and of the soul alone that we can say with supreme truth that "being" necessarily means "being on the way" *(en route)*.[43]

Existential theism values the personal. It puts the person above the proposition. *Personal* refers here to a perceptible, dynamic, interactive, and fully alive dimension that glimpses into the intimacies of the drama of the soul and the transpersonal space shared by the community of persons. Buber writes that ". . . every genuine religious experience has an open or a hidden personal character, for it is spoken out of a concrete situation in which the person takes part as a person."[44] This "hidden personal character" indicates that the personal also contains elements of the esotericor, the mysterious.

Believing existentialism looks at the universe as a dialogue with a "Thou," a "Thou" Buber expounded as a new epistemology based on the notion of *Begegnung* (meeting/encounter). "All real living is meeting," wrote Buber.[45] In all of the spiritual events that impact upon the soul one finds the encounter of a greater "Thou" with a lesser "thou," a greater Personal Being speaking to a lesser personal being. Buber writes: "In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of the breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou."[46] This "Thou" is nothing other than the holy, the numinous, or the sacred encountered in the process of becoming.

The encounter (or *Begegunung)* with the divine, self, other, or event takes on essentially two forms: *the existential moment* and *the epiphanic moment.* The existential moment is apocalyptic. It strongest psychological element is unpredictability or surprise. It is a sudden meeting. Its psychological elements are various: ambivalence, suspense, confusion, anger, despair, grief, anxiety, or, in Kierkegaard's phrase, "fear and trembling."[47] In its ultimate form, the existential moment brings "the sickness unto death."[48] It is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The existential moment radically alters consciousness and leaves us better or worse. It is in reality a disguised form of a meeting with the *alter* ego, the spiritual self that is seeking to emerge, the potential true believer who is now being forced to peel away the mask of the old self so that the new might emerge, a continual process that can be both acutely painful and challenging to the self's spiritual resources.

In this spiritual crisis or "life test,"[49] one is brought face to face with one's own finitude, weakness, or powerlessness to control or direct an event or to recognize its full import. The event seems rather to direct us. In this moment of spiritual crisis, a hostile and sometimes unpredictable world rises up as other (It) to confront the believer. The contrary experiences brought on by suffering and eventual death which the believer unavoidably faces in the world, provide at the same time a silver lining in the sometimes dark cloud of existence. Tests and difficulties create an opportunity for the believer either to choose or to reject the realm of spiritual values, to embrace or to reject the Word of God, to follow the path of the insistent, elemental self or to follow the ways of God. It is worth noting in this context that in Chinese the word for "crisis" is made of two symbols: one

means danger, the other opportunity. These two symbols are closely related to the meaning of the existential moment---a moment in which the fate of our spiritual development, even our soul, hangs in the balance.

In the existential moment, the believer comes face to face with the lower self, either in oneself or others, which, Shoghi Effendi writes, can develop-at the extreme end of the spectrum-into "a monster of selfishness."[50] If we have come to know the ideal self as found in the first valley of The Four Valleys (*Cháhár vadí*) in the station of: "On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned";[51] now we come to know the lower self as: "O QUINTESSENCE OF PASSION," "0 REBELLIOUS ONES," "0 CHILDREN OF FANCY," or "0 WEED THAT SPRINGETH OUT OF THE DUST."[52]

The existential moment is a moment of high realism, the epiphanic moment. It catapults the believer into the realm of the real. It makes theoretical concerns comparatively unreal by the imposition of its unavoidable stark realism. This note of profound realism in relation to spiritual development was also struck by Shoghi Effendi when he pointed to the difference between character and faith:

> There is a difference between character and faith; it is often very hard to accept this fact and put up with it, but the fact remains that a person may believe in and love the Cause-even to being ready to die for it—and yet not have a good personal character, or possess traits at variance with the teachings. We should try to change, to let the power of God help recreate us and make us true Bahá'ís in deed as well as in belief. But sometimes the process is slow, sometimes it never happens because the individual does not try hard enough. But these things cause us suffering and are a test to us.[53]

Instead of making an ideal preachment, instead of encouraging the believer to rise to new heights of spirituality and moral excellence, Shoghi Effendi strikes a chord of profound and open realism. He acknowledges, moreover, that the believer does not always attain the hoped for end, a condition that produces suffering and trial.

The reverse side of the existential moment is the epiphanic moment. Also of sudden onset, and by contrast with the weight of the existential moment, the epiphanic moment is a moment of exaltation, of great illumination or triumph when we are, in the phrase of C. S. Lewis, "surprised by joy."[54] This epiphanic moment is a numinous disclosure of glory, an experience of awe or reverence, triumph or celebration, a hierophany that looms large with promise and exaltation. It

is Bahá'u'lláh in the garden of Ridván,[55] and all the lesser reflections of that spiritual event. It is the believer winning the desires of the heart. It may be a divine healing, a mystical encounter, or the certitude that our lesser will has become one with the greater Will of God.

## THOUGHTS ON EXISTENTIAL MEANING IN BAHÁ'Í HISTORY AND SACRED SCRIPTURE

The patterns of existential experience lie not only in the life of the ordinary believer but also in sacred history and in scripture. For sacred history is not merely the documented, detached, and detailed reconstruction of events, but it also allows for a more profound and personal interpretation of the record, since sacred history is also salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*). Salvation history cannot be reduced merely to an "objective" study of events, but may also be interpreted as both unfolding drama and divine dialectic. The tragic and triumphant events of sacred history disclose a depth of meaning both for spirituality and for human values. Salvation history is profoundly human because it revolves around the lives of sacred figures and their followers who have become models of soteriology and the transformed spiritual life.

The acts and events in the lives of the prophets and spiritual teachers have profound meaning for the spirituality of the believer, for their missions were carried out amidst continual persecution and hardship, both real and threatened. The spirituality exemplified in the lives of the Manifestations of God is consequently not merely theoretical but profoundly authentic. The forty-year period of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and exile, for example, is ripe with manifold meanings that shed light on a life devoted to God and divine truth, a life consecrated to the unity of humanity, and lived out in the face of the severest of adversities. Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and successive banishments (1853–1892), whether by the imposition of the sovereign's decree, or resulting from his own voluntary exile into the mountains of Sulaymaniyyih in Kurdistan (1854–1856), affords an opportunity for believers to consider how they also might face feelings of exile, alienation, loneliness, and hardship in their own lives.

The references from the Bahá'í writings chosen here as pertinent to the existential condition are conveyed through two micro-narratives in The Seven Valleys (*Haft vádí*) and The Four Valleys (*Cháhár vádí*). Both narratives are concerned with the theme of the loss and

recovery of true self and the nature of faith. The renowned literary critic Northrop Frye has written that the theme of estrangement from self and its recovery is the grand theme of all literature: "The story of the loss and regaining of identity, is, I think, the framework of all literature."[56] Following Frye's statement, one would expect to find this theme in sacred literature, and certainly one can find it in Bahá'í sacred literature.

The first story features the *personae* of the mystic and the grammarian who find themselves in the unnamed first valley of The Four Valleys. Both travelers come to the "Sea of Grandeur," a metonymic and metaphorical phrase for God. The station of the self in this valley is the self as soul, the personal self. This is indicated by the highly evocative, transpersonal language Baha'u'llah employs. Baha'u'llah writes: "One must, then, read the book of his own self, rather than some treatise on rhetoric. Wherefore He [God] hath said: 'Read thy Book: There needeth none but thyself to make out an account against thee this day'."[57]

The quranic quotation cited by Bahá'u'lláh raises the question of individual responsibility in attempting the challenging pursuit of self-knowledge. One must begin to read one's own self as one would read a book. One should begin to find meaning and understanding in the pages of one's own life. This theme of taking responsibility for finding personal meaning is moreover one of the cherished themes of existentialist writers, philosophers, and psychologists. Viktor Frankl, for example, has emphasized that taking responsibility for one's own mental and spiritual health, rather than submitting passively to the outrages of fortune, is one of the precipitators of healing.[58]

The brevity of Bahá'u'lláh's fragmentary story is more than compensated for by the impact of its message:

> The story is told of a mystic knower, who went on a journey with a learned grammarian as his companion. They came to the shore of the Sea of Grandeur. The knower straightway flung himself into the waves, but the grammarian stood lost in his reasonings, which were as words that are written on water. The knower called out to him, "Why dost thou not follow?" The grammarian answered, "0 Brother, I dare not advance. I must needs go back again." Then the knower cried, "Forget what thou didst read in the books of Sibavayh and Qawlavayh, of Ibn-i-Hajib and Ibn-i-Malik. and cross the water."[59]

Bahá'u'lláh then quotes from Rúmí's Mathnavi: "The death of self is needed here, not rhetoric/Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves."[60] Although this mini-tale could easily lend itself to lengthy commentary, there are three bare elements that link it to existential concerns. First, there is the wholehearted commitment to the life of faith exemplified by the mystic knower who is very reminiscent of Kierkegaard's Abraham as the "knight of faith,"[61] the one who makes that supreme act of will, the "leap of faith" (*Springet*),[62] and summoning up courage, walks across the water. He stands in marked contrast to the hesitant grammarian. One of the symbolic meanings of walking on water is the death of self, or overcoming nature, for to walk upon water is not only to defy nature but to overcome it. Second, the story puts some definite limitations on the abilities of reason to understand God. Bahá'u'lláh's tale is an inferred strong critique of the powers of reason to put us in touch with divine reality. The grammarian's desire to return to his books was in reality a desire to return to the logical forms of knowledge on which he relied. The mystic knower's experience of God is clearly in the realm of *le vécu*, that transcendent direct experience which transports the seeker into some larger, more synthetic and all-encompassing experience of the divine, an experience that is based on more intuitive, non-discursive forms of knowing. For the existential perspective does not involve primarily analysis, that is the breaking down of a thing into its constituent parts, but rather a holistic interpretation of life experience. When believing existentialism interprets a part of life, it does so in order to interpret it as a constituent of the whole. This holistic view of reality can be found in such writers as Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, all of whom aim at some unified vision of the self with the world.63

In the story of the mystic and the grammarian, it is the heroic self of the true believer that emerges when the mystic knower casts behind him the despair and doubt that is left in reason's wake and leaps into the Sea of Reality. By taking this "leap of faith," the seeker finds the courage to defy the violence of logic and the dictates of reason that command the protection and preservation of self. But instead of sinking beneath the waves and drowning, the mystic knower defies gravity, rises above and walks on water. One notes also in passing the quick turnabout of events, the sudden "great reversal."@ Instead of falling into the sea, as humanity's original parents fell from primordial grace, the mystic knower rises. The spatial metaphor speaks abundantly of

the powers of the "leap of faith," of the concerted will to trust in the powers of God and the search, instead of a capitulation to the doubting Thomas within. The spatial metaphor of walking upon the water is particularly effective in this context, for the leap of faith has the double effect of creating not only a sense of empowerment but also an illusion of space, that is, accentuating the feeling that the spiritual traveler has been freed up and released from the gravitational weight of self.

The Christian parallel to Baha'u'llah's text is the Gospel account of Peter's attempt, in a sorry imitation of Christ, to walk upon the water when Jesus came to the disciples in "the fourth watch of the night . . . walking on the sea." (Matt. 14:25) Like the mystic knower who can be interpreted as a veiled illusion to Baha'u'llah himself, Christ bids the disciple to walk upon the water, but Peter "when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." (Matt. 14:30) The rest of the story is familiar: Jesus stretches out his hand and catches Peter as he is about to sink into the waves and saves him. But Christ's pointed remark to Peter is significant, for it provides the moral meaning to the tale: "0 thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (Matt. 14:31) The dispelling of doubt is also one of the object lessons of Baha'u'llah's micro-tale. Although the grammarian was a learned man and Peter an unschooled fisherman, both individuals were summoned to leave behind "the baser stages of doubt,"[65] and to throw themselves into that dimension of faith that is not characterized by philosophic reasoning, but essentially by faith defined as belief and implicit trust in the divine Power that is greater than ourselves.

Bahá'u'lláh clearly has in mind to dispel such states of doubt and despair not only in the mystical treatise of the valleys but also in the Kitáb-i Iqán (Book of Certitude). In this doctrinal *magnum opus*, Baha'u'llah sets out "the essential prerequisites for the attainment by every true seeker of the object of his quest."[66] These spiritual requisites are accomplished by the practice of ardent search, spiritual passion, ethical discipline, and a spirituality of detachment.

The realism of the gospel narrative is also noteworthy. Matthew does not hide the fact that Peter failed his test of faith, as he will fail later another test of faith when he is accused of being the Nazarene's companion during Christ's trial, (Matt. 26:69–75) Because he feared the annihilation of his own being, Peter denied the One that he loved more than everything in the world, everything except his own life. Peter's test was resolved, as `Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, with untold

remorse,[67] after which he became the ***petros,*** the "rock" that Christ had named him. The tests of Peter, which appeared on the surface as massive failures, proved to be ultimately the means of attaining his predestined station as the rock of faith. Also present in Peter's existential moment is the paradoxical indication that failure participates profoundly in the means of ultimate success.

The other story, borrowed by Bahá'u'lláh from Rúmí's *Mathnaví*,[68] is a brief but bright gem of spiritual literature. It is the story of the lost lover refound, the story of the bereaved Majnún who finds his beloved Layli once again in a hidden garden. This little story is the ultimate allegory in the banishment of despair when the seeker is suddenly surprised by the joy of the soul's reunion with God:

> There was once a lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his beloved, and wasted in the fire of remoteness. From the rule of love, his heart was empty of patience, and his body weary of his spirit; he reckoned life without her as a mockery, and time consumed him away. How many a day he found no rest in longing for her; how many a night the pain of her kept him from sleep; his body was worn to a sigh, his heart's wound had turned him to a cry of sorrow. He had given a thousand lives for one taste of the cup of her presence, but it availed him not. The doctors knew no cure for him, and companions avoided his company; yea, physicians have no medicine for one sick of love, unless the favor of the beloved one deliver him.
>
> At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to ashes. Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the market-place. On a sudden, a watchman followed after him. He broke into a run, with the watchman following; than other watchmen came together, and barred every passage to the weary one. And the wretched one cried from his heart, and ran here and there, and moaned to himself: "Surely this watchman is `Izrá'il, my angel of death, following so fast upon me; or he is a tyrant of men, seeking to harm me." His feet carried him on, the one bleeding with the arrow of love, and his heart lamented. Then he came to a garden wall, and with untold pain he scaled it, for it proved very high; and forgetting his life, he threw himself down to the garden.
>
> And there he beheld his beloved with a lamp in her hand, searching for a ring she had lost. When the heart-surrendered lover looked on his ravishing love, he drew a great breath and raised up his hands in prayer, crying: "0 God! Give Thou glory to the watchman, and riches and long life. For the watchman was Gabriel, guiding this poor one; or he was Isráfíl, bringing life to this wretched one!"[69]

This spiritual allegory can be viewed as providing both fulfilment and closure to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us is really a story about the bondage and liberation of the soul.70 Moreover, the spiritual allegory of the tale of Majnún and Layli can be viewed as having larger implications for the collective spiritual destiny of the human race. Salvation history, which began-at least in the Abrahamic faiths-with the banishment of humanity's original parents from a garden in the Middle East, is fulfilled in a garden by a modern day Iranian Prophet who has commanded the *cherubim* to withdraw their flaming swords and open the way once more to the tree of life.71 Further, Bahá'u'lláh's mystical story of the loss and regain of the beloved in the form of a triumphant theophany strikes a resounding note of victory over despair through a recovery of the seeker's heart's desire and alludes to the fulfilment of humanity's spiritual destiny as it finds its way back to the garden. With Baha'u'llah's recasting of Rúmí's story, we come full circle.

Baha'u'llah's narrative, like other scriptural discourse, is unsparing in its realism. It does not avert the most distressing elements in human existence: loneliness and alienation, loss, acute pain, the thwarting of the desires of the heart, terror, and impending death. Neither can other psychological implications of the story go unnoticed. With Bahá'u'lláh's use of the word "despair" (Persian: *Ya'ass*), we plummet with the bereaved Majnun to the nadir of his depression. Majnún is driven even further beyond the limits of sanity to the very edge of madness, where he contemplates self-destruction. The Persian Prophet's allegory of the lost lover refound even contains Sartre's notion of *Huit Clos*, of no exit, of the lover's being hemmed in on all sides by the watchmen (Persian: *assasshá*) who are the symbols of all the conspiring forces of evil. Majnún's is the overwhelming trauma and drama of the lover who cannot live without love, and who lives and dies for love alone. The implications for a theology of hope and love are there as well in the final resolution of the story.

Baha'u'llah's purpose in laying bare such a momentarily abject theme is to uphold the promise of healing and salvation for the distressed soul. He intimates that the experience of such distressing psychological states can be the prelude to healing and joy and a fuller integration with self. It is worth noting, moreover, that despair and disillusion have a legitimate role to play in the search for love and truth. Kierkegaard was to proclaim that "Every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life."72

Bahá'u'lláh's phrase the "true seeker"73 also clearly implies that no one would ever become a seeker if he or she were not in the first place profoundly dissatisfied, disoriented, or disillusioned with the spiritual status quo, the state of one's soul, or the condition of the world. By contrast, both the self and characters in existentialist literature and philosophy remain trapped in their own morass. For, if as Sartre has said in *L'Etre et le néant (Being and Nothingness),* "freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness,"74 then the prospects are bleak indeed.

Bahá'u'lláh, however, does provide a way out. His allegory of the soul's ultimate reunion with its Creator promises the brightest tokens of God's love and mercy. For, the bereaved lover believed himself to be lost, whereas he was in reality saved. His salvation was reunion with God.

## NOTES

1. See John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (London: Penguin Books, 1972). For a more specifically theological focus of existentialism, see, for example, John Macquarrie's *An Existentialist Theology* (1955) and *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (1960); Fritz Buri's *Theology of Existence* (trans. 1965); Karl Jaspers in *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (trans. 1967); and Jaspers' *Nietzsche and Christianity* (trans. 1961); C. Michalson, ed. *Christianity and the Existentialists* (1956). See also references below,

2. Although it was Kierkegaard who coined the term "existentialist," Walter Kaufmann sees *Dostoevsky's Notes From Underground* (1864) as the overture to the voice of strident individuality that was to be heard later in Kierkegaard. See Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre (New* York: Meridian, 1975) pp. 12, 14-15.

3. John Macquarrie describes Jaspers and Heidegger as standing "somewhere between the confessed theists and the confessed atheists." *(Existentialism,* p. 252)

4. Life's absurdity was made more pointedly by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus)* but as John Passmore points out, at least Camus did not attempt to ontologize absurdity: "But Camus is not an existentialist; he does not believe that absurdity can be ontologized" (John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1968] p. 491). Camus may not be an existentialist in the strict philosophical sense, but his writings are nonetheless definitely existential in perspective.

5. See Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time,* trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. S. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); German original *Sein und Zeit*, 1927. Like several existentialist thinkers, Heidegger

was preoccupied with the meaning of anxiety. As for Jaspers and Marcel, Heidegger rejected the existentialist label when applied to him. But this anti-labelling tendency is itself typical of existentialist thinkers who were strongly individualistic and resisted categorization.

6. See page 199 below.

7. See page 198 below.

8. Among their better-known works are Ludwig Binswanger's *Being-in-the-World* (1963) and Medard Boss' *Psychoanalysis and Dasein Analysis* (1963). For an informative shorter introduction to existential psychology, see Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, "Existential Psychology" in *Theories of Personality* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1957) pp. 552-81.

9. Hegel's absolute idealism was the reigning philosophy in the Denmark of Kierkegaard's day. At the basis of Kierkegaard's disagreement with Hegel was Kierkegaard's assertion that attaining happiness, or in philosophical terms, the highest good, could not be secured through philosophizing alone. For Kierkegaard, ideas alone were a paltry means in securing eternal happiness. See Alistair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) pp. 19-20. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard employed dialectic, but unlike Hegel's logical dialectic working within a closed system, Kierkegaard's dialectic expounded upon the solitary individual working within the three spheres of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Kierkegaard attacked not only Hegelian idealism, but Kantian moral idealism as well. He felt that all forms of rational theology were inadequate for a true understanding of the human condition.

10. Kierkegaard, uncited source quoted by John Updike, "Søren Kierkegaard" in *Atlantic Brief Lives: A Biographical Companion to the Arts,* ed. by Louis Kronenberger (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) p. 430.

11. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* trans. by David L. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941) p. 49.

12. One reads in the literature produced by Bahá'í scholars the occasional urging for the Bahá'í systematic theologian to emerge. While such a grand systematization of Baha'i theology would be a major *tour de force,* one has to keep in mind that systematic theology is predicated on a certain view of finality working within a closed system. Existence, however, unfolds precisely in the opposite manner-through the revelation of new truths that are constantly emerging. See Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* p. 107. The universal scope of Baha'i sacred scripture, in any case, would seem to defy any one theological system to do justice to the diversity of themes and concepts treated in the Baha'i writings. It is rather more likely that a number of differing theological and metaphysical thought systems will emerge in time and coexist within the Baha'i writings.

13. For the expression *'ilm-i vújúdí* see, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of "The Knowledge of the Divine Manifestations" in *Some Answered*

*Questions,* comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 157. Juan Ricardo Cole has alluded to a resemblance between 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *`ilm-i vújúdí* with that of Plotinus' primal intellection in the Enneads, V. 3,2 and a similar notion in Avicenna, *De Anima,* 24849 ("The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings" [Ottawa: Association for Baha'i Studies, 1982] p. 35, n. 149.

14. *The Divine Art of Living,* comp. by Mabel Hyde Paine (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1944) p. 25.

15. 'Abdu'l-Baha in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Reality of Man* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956) p. 9. The complete quotation is: "Thoughts may be divided into two classes: Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone. Thought that expresses itself in action." Existential theological discourse is of course vehicled by words but carries the potential for a more direct connection with the individual's life.

16. By the "real self," I mean both the experiences that the self has gleaned in the world and reflections on objective questions in light of that experience, rather than the mere analysis of abstract, objective questions in which the subject is neither visible nor present.

17. I do not advocate that the experiences of the individual alone become the sole locus of reflection. I mean rather that the creation of this discourse be carried out in light of the meaning of Baha'i scripture, sacred history, and subjective experience as it has contributed to the process of spiritual transformation or philosophical reflection.

18. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche,* vol. 47 (1950) p. 64, quoted by Bernard J. F. Lonergan in *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) p. 158.

19. The complete sentence reads: "In this Day, We can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behavior of the avowed believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. by Shoghi Effendi [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976] p. 343)

20. From Jasper's essay "On My Philosophy" quoted in Kaufmann, *Existentialism,* p. 232.

21. I am following some main themes raised by several existential theologians, but I have made a conscious attempt to perceive their concerns through the filter of a Bahá'í worldview. A more specifically Baha'i treatment of such concerns can be found below in "Existential Meaning in Baha'i Sacred History and Writings." Each of the six points that follow deserves a fuller treatment than the limitations of space allow.

22. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 62. It is perhaps the deceptive simplicity of this teaching that has caused it to suffer a certain neglect in comparison with the scholarly treatment of other Bahá'í teachings. For a further discussion on

the search for truth, see "The Starting Point: The Search for Truth" 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) pp. l-40. See also Gary L. Matthews' instructive article "The Searching Eye" (*Bahá'í News,* [September, 19891 pp. 2-9). In his talks in North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently placed the search for truth first in his presentations of Baha'i teachings. See, for example, his talks in Washington, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Boston, Montreal, Sacramento, and on two occasions in New York, and also in his long expose of Bahá'í teachings in Paris.

23. The complete quotation is: "It [the Bahá'í Faith] moreover, enjoins upon *its followers* the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth." ("A World Religion: The Faith of Baha'u'llah," a summary statement of the origin, teachings, and institutions of the Baha'i Faith prepared in 1947 by Shoghi Effendi for the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 19501 p. 9, emphasis added) This quotation is particularly noteworthy because of the italicized words. The search for truth is not just for those who are seeking truth in their pre-Bahá'í stage. The duty of the search continues in the post-Bahá'í stage.

24. This phrase is from Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill to the men of Athens. Luke reports Paul as saying in The Acts of the Apostles: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring" (17:28).

25. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* Vol. 1 (London: Nisbet and Company, 1941) p. 14.

26. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life,* Vol. 1, trans. by David F. Swenson, Lillian Marvin Swenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1946) p. 180.

27. Kierkegaard, quoted in Kaufmann, *Existentialism,* p. 18. I do not think that Kierkegaard meant to exclude reason entirely in his promotion of passion in the search for truth. The metaphysical dialectic that he created in reaction to the systematizers of his day is, of course, rational insofar as it can be subjected to analysis. Kierkegaard's sometimes immoderate railings against the use of systematic reasoning were intended to shock the readers of his day out of what he viewed to be the irrelevance of speculative philosophy with respect to the human condition.

28. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1950) pp. 195-96.

29. Momen cites E. G. Browne, "considered to be one of the greatest academics on Iran that there has ever been" as one who dedicated himself passionately to Iranian studies as well as the Constitutional Movement. ("Bahá'í Scholarship: Definitions and Perspectives," *The Bahá'í Studies Review,* vol. 3, no. 2 [1994] p. 55)

30. Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom,* trans. by Thomas Common (Edinburgh: T. N. Foules, 1910) p. 219.

31. Ibid.

32. "Being-in-the-world" is one translation of *Dasein* in Heidegger's *Being and Time* and *What is Metaphysics?*

33. Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism,* trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen and Company, 1948) p. 26.

34. Sartre declares: "Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative. . . ." *(Existentialism is a Humanism,* quoted in Kaufmann, *Existentialism,* p. 349)

*35. Existentialism and Humanism,* trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975) p. 28.

*36. Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft* (Zurich, 1843) p. 78; cited in Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 89.

37. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, reprint 1988) pp. 37-38.

38. Heidegger has himself explained the meaning of *Dasein* in the introductory key sentence *of Being and Time* with this somewhat obscure statement: *"Das 'Wesen' des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz."* ("The essence of being there *(Dasein)* lies in its existence.") (p. *42). Dasein* referred to typically human existence and was the prelude to the greater discussion of *Sein* (Being).

39. James C. Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought From the Enlightenment to Vatican 11* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) p. 355.

40. Jarsolav Pelikan comments in his introduction to Chesterton's extract from *Orthodoxy* that although Chesterton "was not a scholar or a theologian but a journalist and the author of the popular Father Brown detective stories," nevertheless "in books on Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas, and in two interconnected works entitled *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy,* he defended the integrity of the theological tradition with a vigor that many professional theologians and scholars could (and did) envy." *(The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought* [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990], p. 385); quotation from Chesterton is from pp. 389-90.

41. Paul Tillich, *Perspectives On 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) p. 245.

42. Tillich, *Perspectives,* p. 244.

43. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope,* trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962) pp. 10-11. For a further discussion of the metaphysic of hope, see Marcel's "Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope" in *Homo Viator,* pp. 29-67.

44. Buber, *Eclipse of God,* p. 37.

*45. Z and Thou,* 2d ed., Trans by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1958) p. 11. Joseph Dabney Bettis makes this cogent description of *Begegnung* in his forward to extracts from Buber's *Z and Thou:*

"There are times when the 'other' breaks through our worlds and confronts us as a being which exists in itself and apart from our interaction with it. In these encounters there is no longer any question of our controlling and shaping the being which confronts us: it presents itself to us as something real in itself. This confrontation Buber calls the 'I-Thou relationship'." *(Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion* [London: SCM Press, 19691 p. 220)

*46. I and Thou,* p. 6.

47. From the title of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death.* Kierkegaard considered these books from the aesthetic point of view to be "the most perfect" books that he had ever written. (Translator's note, p. 18) The prose of these texts is remarkably free of that strain and passion that is so characteristic of much of his other writing. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death* are characterized by a simplicity and a philosophical lucidity uncharacteristic of most of Kierkegaard's other writings (Trans. by Walter Lowrie [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

*48. The Sickness Unto Death* remains to this day the preeminent study in the psychology of despair and was very influential on the thinking of the existentialists who followed Kierkegaard such as Heidegger and Sartre. Kierkegaard explains that the sickness unto death is despair. Since death would mean the end of despair, he argues that ". . the torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the situation of the moribund when he lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die-yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available." (pp. 150–51)

49. I have explored this notion of "life test" in *Dimensions in Spirituality: Reflections on the Meaning of Spiritual Life and Transformation in Light of the Baha'i Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994) pp. 128-58.

50. Shoghi Effendi makes a binary distinction in the Baha'i understanding of the self. One is the divine self, the identity of the individual created God; the other is the ego, ". . the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on." (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, December 10, 1947 in *Lights of Guidance: A Baha'i Reference File,* comp. by Helen Hornby [New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994] p. 113, n. 386)

51. Baha'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys,* trans. by M. Gail with A. K. Khan, 3d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978) p. 50.

52. The epithets are from *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1954), Persian nos. 50, 65, 67, and 68 respectively.

53. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, October 17, 1944, quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life: Selections from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith* (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1983) p. 20.

54. *Surprised by Joy* (Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1986) is the title of C. S. Lewis' spiritual autobiography in which he describes his conversion from atheism to Christianity. The title, however, does not describe Lewis' actual conversion experience, which was, as he has specified, "not to Christianity" but to theism (p. 184) and which he has described as "strangely unemotional" (p. 179), for it was a conversion to the realisation of free choice. Riding on top of a bus in Oxford, "going up Headington Hill," Lewis felt himself to be entrapped in a suit of armor or a kind of "corslet." Lewis became acutely conscious at that moment that he had been given the free choice either to keep this armor on or unbuckle it and go free. He was given the freedom to choose, but he did not seem to be able to do otherwise than to choose God. "Then came the repercussion on the imaginative level," says Lewis. "I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. . . . I rather disliked the feeling." (p. 179)

55. For a moving poetic envisioning of this unparalleled spiritual event, see Robert Hayden's poem "Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan" in *Selected Poems* (New York: October House, 1966).

56. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: C.B.C. Publications, 1970) p. 21.

57. *The Four Valleys,* p. 51. The quranic reference is from 17:15.

58. This is one of the main themes in Frankl's *logotherapy,* a psychological technique that consists in the alleviation of suffering through the search for meaning. Viktor Frank1 was more than a clinician and an armchair philosopher, since as a death-camp inmate, he was subjected to all the rigors and deprivations of concentration camp life, about which he wrote: ". . in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of prisoner the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him-mentally and spiritually." (Man's *Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* [New York: Pocket Books, 1973] p. 105)

59. *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys,* p. 51.

60. Ibid., p. 52.

61. Kierkegaard excogitates upon Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. It contests the Hegelian notion of a system or science of universals or absolutes by a juxtaposition and contrast of the individual, represented by Abraham, who chooses to violate a universal ethical norm (infanticide) which requires the sacrifice of his beloved offspring. Kierkegaard says: "The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others." *(Fear and Trembling,* p. 90) "The true knight of faith is always absolute isolation, the false knight is sectarian." (p. 89)

62. Kierkegaard was quick to acknowledge his debt to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his elaboration of the idea of the leap. See Kierkegaard's *Papirer*

V. B 1, 3, p. 53. For both Lessing and Kierkegaard truth meant religious truth and the gap that had to be overcome was the accidental or contingent nature of historical truth with the "unconditional certainty required by religious faith." (See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* [London: Routledge, 19911 p. 98.)

63. For example, in Jaspers' three modes of "encompassing" (empirical existence, consciousness, and spirit) "spirit is the process of fusing and constructing all totalities in a present which is never finished yet always fulfilled. It is always on its way toward a possible completion of empirical existence where universality, the whole, and every particular would all be members of a totality." (Karl Jaspers, *Existenzphilosophie* in Kaufmann, *Existentialism,* p. 216)

64. The idea of the "great reversal" has universal implications that transcend its immediate Bábí–Bahá'í origins, but I put the phrase back into its historical-scriptural context. The phrase "the great reversal," synonymous with *vav va makousé (the reversed vav)* occurs in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (1753-1826 CE) founder of the Shaykhi school of Islam. Al-Ahsá'í interpreted the inverted or reversed Arabic letter *wáw* when written out in full (wáw-alif-wáw) as a sign of the advent of the promised Qá'im. In a tablet written to George David Hardegg (1812-1879) (*Lawh-i Hirtík*) Baha'u'llah alludes to the great reversal:"O Friend! Observe the 'mystery of the Great Reversal in the sign of the Sovereign' . . Call thou to mind the fact that when Jesus came he was rejected by the divines, the learned and the educated whilst he who was a mere fisherman entered the Kingdom." (Provisional translation by Stephen N. Lambden) In the Kitab-i Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh also writes: "Behold, the 'mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign' hath now been made manifest." (para. 157, p. 75) With these words, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to his own coming as fulfilment of prophecy. The great reversal refers more specifically to the eschatological phenomenon of the inversion of spiritual status between clergy and laity at the advent of the Prophet. The divines who reject Bahá'u'lláh are cast down and the laity who accept him are exalted to the position of spiritual eminence formerly enjoyed by these same divines. I draw here upon Stephen Lambden's "The Translation and Significance of a Shaykhi Phrase in the 'Most Holy Book' (*al-Kitáb al-aqdas*): 'The Mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign (*sirr al-tankís li-ramz al-ra'ís*)" a paper delivered at the Association for Bahá'í Studies-English-Speaking Europe Religious Studies Special Interest Group Seminar, July 1993. *See* the *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* for further details.

65. The complete quotation is: "0 FLEETING SHADOW! Pass beyond the baser stages of doubt and rise to the exalted heights of certainty. Open the eye of truth, that thou mayest behold the veilless Beauty and exclaim: Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators!" (Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words,* p. 9)

66. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965) p. 139. Shoghi Effendi refers to those passages of the *Iqán* which deal with the true seeker. (pp. 192-96)

67. "Even the glorious Peter was not rescued from the flame of trials, and wavered. Then he repented and mourned the mourning of a bereaved one and his lamentation raised unto the Supreme Concourse." ('Abdu'l-Baha, from a tablet to an American believer, December 23, 1902, in *Star of the West,* 8:19, March 2, 1918)

68. See Jalalu'ddin Rúmí, *Mathnaví* in Reynold A. Nicholson's translation (London: Luzac and Co., 1977). The original version of Bahá'u'lláh's elaboration is found in "The Unworthy Lover," vol. 2, pp. 275-76, corresponding to the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth *Daftar.*

69. Baha'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys,* pp. 13-14.

70. 'Abdu'l-Baha says that the story of Adam and Eve "contains divine mysteries and universal meanings and it is capable of marvellous explanations." *(Some Answered Questions,* p. 123) 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strong critique of literal interpretations of the story suggests its pronounced mythical features. He weaves a number of themes into his explanation while inviting the reader to search for others. (p. 126) I vastly reduce one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thematic explanations to this paraphrase: Adam and Eve are the symbols of spirit (Adam) and soul (Eve). The serpent signifies Adam's attachment/bondage to or love of the human world. Since the serpent continues to live in the midst of Adam's descendants, the descendants persist in living in bondage, at enmity with God and in strife with one another. The Tree of Life is symbolic of the divine Word or the divine Manifestations of Christ and Bahá'u'lláh who offer salvation and release from bondage by their sanctifying grace and the light of divine knowledge. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá's fuller account, see "Adam and Eve" in *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 122-26.

71. See Genesis 3:24. Baha'u'llah writes: "0 YE DWELLERS IN THE HIGHEST PARADISE! Proclaim unto the children of assurance that within the realms of holiness, nigh unto the celestial paradise, a new garden hath appeared, round which circle the denizens of the realm on high and the immortal dwellers of the exalted paradise. Strive, then, that ye may attain that station, that ye may unravel the mysteries of love from its wind-flowers and learn the secret of divine and consummate wisdom from its eternal fruits. Solaced are the eyes of them that enter and abide therein!" *(Hidden Words,* p. 27)

72. *Either/Or,* Vol. 2, p. 175.

73. *Kitáb-i-Iqán,* p. 192.

74. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology (L'Etre et le néant)* trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) p. 28.

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# REVISIONING THE SACRED

Any theology, Bahá'í or other, is viewed in today's world as being largely irrelevant to the concerns of humanity. Yet, Bahá'ís believe that the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith contain as yet untapped resources from which the peoples of the earth may find common bonds, bridge the gap between East and West, and lay the foundations of universal peace.

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