

ESSAY / ESSAI / ENSAYO

Absolute Poverty and Utter Nothingness*

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** Some years ago in a graduate research course I was taking, I had an experience that greatly affected me. The professor emeritus teaching the course did something that both shocked and embarrassed me: he started class with a prayer. I was shocked that a professor would do such a thing and embarrassed for him because he was obviously out of touch with modern-day university life. In 1986, while attending the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting in San Francisco, I had a similar experience. During a session in which the paper "Emptiness: A Transcultural Goal of Wholistic Education" was presented, I was surprised to hear such a paper exploring what I considered spiritual issues at AERA, and I was embarrassed for the presenter. He obviously seemed out of touch with what was going on in the rest of the sessions, but like my research professor, did not seem to know it or be concerned about it. After each of these experiences, I pondered over why I felt the way I did, because I actually believed in what they were doing and saying. Each of these experiences led me to further explore myself, my convictions and my way of doing things. This essay is one of the results of that exploration.

Abstract

This essay briefly explores Bahá'u'lláh's conceptualization of "poverty" (detachment from the world) and "nothingness" (selflessness); identifies five representatives of the greatest philosophers and prophets of all time—Muhammad, Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus; describes each of their conceptualizations of selflessness and detachment; examines some commonalities among them and commonalities with Bahá'u'lláh's conceptualization; and then closes with some qualifying remarks.

Resumé

Le présent article explore la conceptualisation que Bahá'u'lláh fait de la «pauvreté» (détachement du monde) et du «néant» (abnégation); il identifie cinq des plus grands philosophes et prophètes de tous les temps—Mahoma, Socrate, Confucius, Bouddha et Jésus; il décrit la conceptualisation que chacun d'eux fait de l'abnégation et du détachement; il examine certains points communs entre leurs conceptualisations puis examine les points communs avec la conceptualisation de Bahá'u'lláh; enfin, l'article présente quelques remarques nuancées en guise de conclusion.

Resumen

Este ensayo brevemente explora el concepto de Bahá'u'lláh acerca de la "pobreza" (desprendimiento del mundo) y "la nada" (abnegación); identifica cinco representantes entre los más grandes filósofos y profetas de todos los tiempos—Mahoma, Sócrates, Confucio, Buda, y Jesús; relata los conceptos de abnegación y desprendimiento de cada uno; examina lo que tienen en común entre ellos y con el concepto de Bahá'u'lláh; después de lo cual cierra con algunos comentarios calificadores.

The Stage of Poverty and Nothingness

In *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh's mystical description of "the stages that mark the wayfarer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland" (4), the seventh and final stage is translated as "the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness" (36). Bahá'u'lláh describes this stage in these words:

This station is the dying from self and the living in God, the being poor in self and rich in the Desired One. Poverty as here referred to signifieth being poor in the things of the created world, rich in the things of God's world He who hath attained this station is sanctified from all that pertaineth to the world.... For whatever the creatures have is limited by their own limits, and whatever the True One hath is sanctified therefrom.... (36–37)

In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh explains how this condition of poverty and nothingness requires one to be free of self and worldly passions. He says:

Free thyself from the fetters of this world, and loose thy soul from the prison of self. (*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* 36)

The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power, quench it not with the contrary winds of self and passion. (*Hidden Words* 33)

Wouldst thou have Me, seek none other than Me; and wouldst thou gaze upon My beauty, close thine eyes to the world and all that is therein; for My will and the will of another than Me, even as fire and water, cannot dwell together in one heart. (*Hidden Words* 33)

The self here refers to the lower self and to those things in the world that keep one from God. As long as one is filled with self and worldly attachments, there will be no place for the enlightenment and energy that comes from God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of this condition:

Then know, O thou virtuous soul, that as soon as thou becomest separated from aught else save God and dost cut thyself from the worldly things, thy heart will shine with the lights of divinity and with the effulgence of the Sun of Truth from the horizon of the Realm of Might, and then thou wilt be filled by the spirit of power from God and become capable of doing that which thou desirest. (*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 3:709. Qtd. in *The Divine Art of Living* 16)

The short obligatory prayer revealed by Bahá'u'lláh gives the purpose of life and the necessary station—powerlessness and poverty—for achieving that purpose:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness anti to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.

There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 4)

Powerlessness, poverty, and nothingness are intimately linked with our purpose and goal of life: to know and love God. These ideas, often expressed as detachment, selflessness, or other related virtues, are presented in numerous pronouncements by Bahá'u'lláh and can be found throughout his writings:

O peoples of the earth! God, the Eternal Truth, is My witness that streams of fresh and soft-flowing waters have gushed from the rocks through the sweetness of the words uttered by your Lord, the Unconstrained; and still ye slumber. Cast away that which ye possess, and, on the wings of detachment, soar beyond all created things. Thus biddeth you the Lord of creation, the movement of Whose Pen bath revolutionized the soul of mankind. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 39)

This is not a Cause which may be made a plaything for your idle fancies, nor is it a field for the foolish and faint of heart. By God, this is the arena of insight and detachment, of vision and upliftment, where none may spur on their chargers save the valiant horsemen of the Merciful, who have severed all attachment to the world of being. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 84)

By self-surrender and perpetual union with God is meant that men should merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness beside His Purpose. Whatsoever the Creator commandeth His creatures to observe, the same must they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfil. They should in no wise allow their fancy to obscure their judgment, neither should they regard their own imaginings as the voice of the Eternal. (*Gleanings* 337)

The station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth, and will ever remain exalted above, every other station. (*Gleanings* 338)

Prophets and Philosophers

In many writings, Bahá'u'lláh, and later 'Abdu'l-Bahá, reinforce the teachings of the prophets, their ancient wisdom, and their writings concerning detachment and self-surrender. Bahá'u'lláh considered the founders of the world's religions to have been the most influential individuals in history; he places the lesser prophets and spiritual philosophers next in rank. The philosophers' knowledge and insight derives from the influence of the major prophets or manifestations of God:

To such a development did they attain that the philosophers of Greece would come and acquire knowledge from the learned men of Israel. Such an one was Socrates, who visited Syria, and took from the children of Israel the teachings of the Unity of God and of the immortality of the soul. After his return to Greece, he promulgated these teachings. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 14)

Of the spiritual philosophers of both the East and West discussed in the Bahá'í writings, Socrates and Confucius stand out as preeminent. The Bahá'í writings do not place Socrates and Confucius at the same level as the prophets of God, but they do recognize their greatness and their contribution to the world. Bahá'u'lláh refers to Socrates as

wise, accomplished and righteous.... What a penetrating vision into philosophy this eminent man had! He is the most distinguished of all philosophers and was highly versed in wisdom. We testify that he is one of the heroes in this field and an outstanding champion dedicated unto it. He had a profound knowledge of such sciences as were current amongst men as well as of those which were veiled from their minds. Methinks he drank one draught when the Most Great Ocean overflowed with gleaming and life-giving waters. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 146)

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that Confucius "became the cause of civilization, advancement and prosperity for the people of China" (*Tablets* 469) and recognized his great contributions in developing a moral system and reform (*Compilation of Compilations* 15–16). The Bahá'í writings do not consider Confucius as a prophet, but his name is listed among those of recognized manifestations of God in a talk by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Blessed souls—whether Moses, Jesus, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Confucius or Muhammad—were the cause of the illumination of the world of humanity. (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 346)

Leading historians, such as Arnold Toynbee, and philosophers, such as Karl Jaspers, also recognize the founders of the world's religions and these two philosophers (Socrates and Confucius) as influential individuals in human history. Jaspers, a leading existentialist philosopher and "indubitably one of the most seminal minds in the philosophy of the twentieth century" (Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* xi), has written extensively and systematically on philosophy. Among his important works is *The Great Philosophers*, a three-volume survey of philosophy based on those individuals whose ideas have most shaped humankind's concepts and beliefs.

Jaspers surveyed the thinking and accomplishments of all germinal thinkers of history, including the founders of the world's religions and lesser prophets, and identified those who had the most profound influence on civilization. He divided these into three main groups: paradigmatic individuals, great thinkers, and philosophical thinkers in other realms. He further subdivided the great thinkers into (1) "seminal thinkers" (Plato, St. Augustine, and Kant), (2) "intellectual visionaries" (metaphysicians—Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Anselm, Nicholas of Cusa, Spinoza, Lao-tzu, and Narajuna; those "fired with the religion of the cosmos"—Xenophanes, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Poseidonius, and Bruno; "visionaries"—Origen, Bohme, and Schelling; and constructors—Hobbes, Leibniz, and Fichte), (3) "negators" (Abelard, Descartes, and Hume) and "awakeners"

(Pascal, Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche), and (4) “creative orderers” (Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, Shankara, and Chu Hsi). He identifies Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus as the paradigmatic individuals of human history:

The four paradigmatic individuals have exerted a historical influence of incomparable scope and depth. Other men of great stature may have been equally important for smaller groups. But when it comes to broad, enduring influence over many hundreds of years, they are so far above all others that they must be singled out if we are to form a clear view of the world’s history. (Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* 13)

These men set norms by their attitudes, actions, experience of being, and their imperatives. In delving to the heart of their own problems, subsequent philosophers have looked to these thinkers. Each in his sphere, they have all exerted an enormous influence on later philosophy. (Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* 99–100)

Of those distinguished individuals of the past whom Jaspers considered, he felt only Muhammad might be comparable, but he did not feel Muhammad had an equal depth to these four. Because of the impact and quality of Muhammad’s life, evidenced by the effects he has had on present-day thought anti civilization, and because of the importance placed on him in the Bahá’í writings, his conceptualizations will also be presented in this essay along with the four paradigmatic individuals identified by Jaspers. Not only are these five individuals supported in the Bahá’í, historical, and philosophical literature as among the most influential thinkers in human history, they also represent different ages and cultures. Their teachings have been instrumental in the great civilizations of both the East and West and have greatly influenced current thinking.

We can take these five individuals as representative of the greatest philosophical and religious ideologies of both the East and the West. By exploring Muhammad’s, Jesus’, and Buddha’s teachings, we can look at the religions of the West and the East that seem to have had the greatest influence on their respective histories. By considering Socrates’ and Confucius’ teachings, we can explore the most influential philosophers of both the West and the East. Confucius and Socrates are regarded as preeminent philosophers, and Muhammad, Jesus, and Buddha as significant religious leaders throughout the world today. A brief description of what these great teachers said that might be related to Bahá’u’lláh’s conceptualizations of nothingness and poverty is presented below.

Jesus Christ (d. circa A.D. 29)

Jesus taught that this physical world is nothing in comparison with the spiritual world. He exemplified his teachings by sacrificing worldly desires for his spiritual mission. The path to salvation involved resisting the temptations of this limited world and advancing toward the kingdom of heaven. He spoke much of love. Love free of self and the world is the ultimate condition:

When the sanctified breezes of Christ and the holy light of the Greatest Luminary [Bahá’u’lláh] were spread abroad, the human realities—that is to say, those who turned toward the Word of God and received the profusion of His bounties—were saved from this attachment and sin, obtained everlasting life, were delivered from the chains of bondage, and attained to the world of liberty. They were freed from the vices of the human world, and were blessed by the virtues of the Kingdom. This is the meaning of the words of Christ, “I gave My blood for the life of the world” [cf. John 6:51]—that is to say, I have chosen all these troubles, these sufferings, calamities, and even the greatest martyrdom, to attain this object, the remission of sins (that is, the detachment of spirits from the human world, and their attraction to the divine world) in order that souls may arise who will be the very essence of the guidance of mankind, and the manifestations of the perfections of the Supreme Kingdom. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 125)

Jesus stressed belief and faith over reason and tradition. One’s abilities are only limited by one’s belief and faith. This faith leads to heaven and a freeing of worldly cares. It implies a trust and contentment with the Will of God:

The end of the message is: Believe in the good tidings. Have faith (*pistis*). Faith is indispensable for admission to the kingdom of heaven. It is the prerequisite of salvation and is itself salvation. (Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus* 69)

Faith is a word for the Biblical relation to God. It means absolute trust in the will of God. “Thy will be done” is an expression of this trust. Faith is certainty, concerning God, concerning man’s bond to

Him, concerning God's love which is the foundation of prayer. Faith is the salt that seasons man's whole being. But it cannot be taken for granted, induced by design. It does not understand itself. (Jaspers, *Socrates. Buddha. Confucius. Jesus* 70–71)

In several places in the Bible, Christ taught that knowledge was achieved through faith and that this faith could not be completely understood. He spoke of people hearing and seeing, yet not understanding. He praised the poor and lowly because they were receptive to the truth. The learned and wealthy rejected his teachings because they were blinded by their own knowledge and attachments. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the meaning of one of Christ’s teachings as follows:

For this physical life is not immortal, and its existence is equivalent to nonexistence. So it is that Christ said to one of His disciples: “Let the dead bury their dead;” [Matt. 8:22] for “That which is born of the flesh is flesh: and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” [John 3:6]

Observe: those who in appearance were physically alive, Christ considered dead; for life is the eternal life, and existence is the real existence. Wherever in the Holy Books they speak of raising the dead, the meaning is that the dead were blessed by eternal life; where it is said that the blind received sight, the signification is that he obtained the true perception; where it is said a deaf man received hearing, the meaning is that he acquired spiritual and heavenly hearing. This is ascertained from the text of the Gospel where Christ said: “These are like those of whom Isaiah said, They have eyes and see not, they have ears and hear not; and I healed them.” [Cf. Matt. 13:14 and John 12:40–41]

The meaning is not that the Manifestations are unable to perform miracles, for They have all power. But for Them inner sight, spiritual healing and eternal life are the valuable and important things. Consequently, whenever it is recorded in the Holy Books that such a one was blind and recovered his sight, the meaning is that he was inwardly blind, and that he obtained spiritual vision, or that he was ignorant and became wise, or that he was negligent and became heedful, or that he was worldly and became heavenly. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 101–2)

Jesus taught the importance of poverty. This poverty included material poverty but was concerned more with a spiritual reality. He spoke of how hard it was for a wealthy person to enter heaven and in the beatitudes extolled the station of the poor and meek. The poor and meek have nothing and therefore can be filled with the new truth and reality. In the same sense, Jesus said we must become like children to enter the kingdom: “The one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4).

Christ was himself an example of all he taught. Even though he lived in the world, he was detached from and was above the world:

In the Gospel it is said that a man came to Christ and called Him “Good Master.” Christ answered, “Why callest thou Me good? there is none good but One, that is, God” [Matt. 19:16, 17] This did not mean—God forbid!—that Christ was a sinner; but the intention was to teach submission, humility, meekness and modesty to the man to whom He spoke. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 170)

Ego and worldly desires were eliminated from Jesus’ heart and mind, and the limited knowledge and condition of his environment could not restrict him. He was the essence of faith and poverty.

Buddha (circa 563–483 B.C.)

Buddha was raised in wealth and luxury but left this behind in his search for truth. He practiced ascetic self-denial but later adopted the middle way between self-mortification and worldly ambition as the path of salvation. Buddhism has probably had more adherents than any other religion or philosophy in history and has gone through many changes:

The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God, but later the original principles of His doctrines gradually disappeared and ignorant customs and ceremonials arose and increased until they finally ended in the worship of statues and images. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 165)

The Four Noble Truths are said to summarize the Buddha’s teachings: life involves suffering, the cause of suffering is desire, elimination of desire leads to a cessation of suffering, and the elimination of desire is the result of

following the Noble Eightfold Path. This Path consists of right mode of seeing things, right thought, right speech, right action, right way of living, right effort, right mindedness, and right meditation (Gard, *Buddhism*). Suffering is caused by not understanding reality and by a preoccupation with worldly and selfish desires. If we can rise above our ignorant cravings and our selfish desires, we can find oneness, happiness and peace. The Buddhist scriptures state: “Let a man leave anger, let him forsake pride, let him overcome all bondage! No sufferings befall the man who is not attached to name and form, and who calls nothing his own” (*Dhammapada* 17:221, qtd. In Müller, *Sacred Books of the East* 59).

The final stage in the Noble Eightfold Path—right meditation—has been characterized as emptying oneself so as to face squarely and dea with sensual cravings and vain imaginings. Only when we have reached this state of right meditation or emptiness of self and limited worldly learnings can we achieve nirvana. Nirvana is also called *sunyata* or emptiness:

According to Buddhist scholars, this phenomenal world is an “aggregate” existence made up of conditions, and not a self-existing reality (*Atman*). When the mind is said to have attained “dissolution,” it means that the mind has entered into a state of “absolute emptiness” (*sunyata*), that is completely free from all conditionalities, that is, “Transcendence.” In other words, the mind gains its ultimate reality, being now above birth and death, self and non-self, good and evil. (Suzuki, “Enlightenment” 42)

This condition is far beyond the relaxation or meditative states achieved through simple physical and mental techniques. It leads to a state of awakening or enlightenment.

Koller describes the central ideas of Buddhism as follows:

The main philosophical implications of the ethical-religious teachings of Buddhism are contained in the doctrines of no-self (*anatta*) and impermanence (*anicca*). Both of these doctrines in turn are underwritten by the principle of dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*), according to which everything that exists is constantly changing and depends on everything else. The chief difference between the doctrines of *anatta* and *anicca* is that the former refers to the non-substantiality of the self, whereas the latter refers to the non—substantiality of things in the world. (*Oriental Philosophies* 155)

Not only did Buddha teach these concepts, his very life was a realization of them. His system of knowledge did not rely on sense perception, logical operations, or empirical proofs, but on the transformations of consciousness and the stages of meditation. Buddha’s concepts of emptiness—freedom from self and the world—result in a tolerance for others that allows the veils of ignorance and illusion to be removed. A comparison between Buddhism and Christianity makes this point:

In both religions, taken at their highest, the goal of aspiration was not extinction of sorrow, hut extinction of self—love: in Buddhism the quenching of *trishna*, or *upadana*, “thirst”, in Christianity the quenching of... “lust”, “inordinate desire.” In both religions the goal meant a finality, a state in which there was an end of death; and in both, moreover, it meant a change which no language could define, and to which no standard could apply. (Scott, *Buddhism and Christianity: A Parallel and a Contrast* 215)

Socrates (circa 470–399 B.C.)

Socrates’ influence has endured throughout the centuries and can be found in many great works of Western thought. Socrates is not considered a prophet, nor did he make such a claim, but he felt lie had a divine mission to question unrelentingly in search of knowledge of the true and good. Bahá’u’lláh says the following about Socrates:

He practised self-denial, repressed his appetites for selfish desires and turned away from material pleasures. He withdrew to the mountains where he dwelt in a cave. He dissuaded men from worshipping idols and taught them the way of God, the Lord of Mercy, until the ignorant rose up against him. They arrested him and put him to death in prison.... He it is who perceived a unique, a tempered, and a pervasive nature in things, bearing the closest likeness to the human spirit, and he discovered this nature to be distinct from the substance of things in their refined form. He hath a special pronouncement on this weighty theme. Wert thou to ask from the worldly wise of his generation about this exposition, thou wouldst witness their incapacity to grasp it. (*Tablets* 146–47)

Socrates forced those around him to reexamine knowledge that they took for granted. He believed people must be aware of their own ignorance before they can learn something new. Socrates wrote nothing of his own. Plato, his most brilliant pupil, wrote his memories of what he had heard as a series of dialogues under the name of Socrates. Three of those Dialogues are *Meno*, *The Apology*, and *The Republic*. In the *Meno*, Plato describes how Socrates' insight grows from perplexity and the state of recognizing one's own ignorance, as Socrates questions a slave on a mathematical question.

In *The Apology*, Plato describes how Socrates sets out to find someone wiser than he, because Socrates is perplexed by the Oracle of Delphi's statement that he is the wisest person. In his dialectical encounters with the supposedly wise people of his day—the politicians, the poets, and the artisans—Socrates found them not wise at all, but blinded by their own false knowledge. Because of their pride, fear, and attachment to their own knowledge, they put barriers between themselves and truth. Because Socrates was aware of and acknowledged his ignorance, he was wiser than the others.

Socrates felt that one must use more than reason in coming to knowledge. He tells of a voice that spoke to him and gave him guidance that he would obey without understanding. Throughout his life this voice had spoken to him to guide him where his reason could not (Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*). For Socrates, self-knowledge is the knowledge of God, and humankind can only approach the divine through leaving behind earthly passions.

Confucius (circa 551–479 B.C.)

Confucius has been a dominant force in China for over two thousand years and can be said to have truly molded Chinese civilization and philosophy, but still he is little understood (Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*). He believed that righteousness, propriety, and filial piety were fundamental virtues of humanity. Of the four paradigmatic individuals, he seems to speak the least about Bahá'u'lláh's concepts of poverty and nothingness, as he focused more on worldly matters. Confucius' contemporary Lao Tzu, however, spoke much about these concepts.

Confucius did not consider himself a prophet, a religious leader, or even a sage, the highest of the four types of people in his philosophy. He is considered by many to be the first person to devote his life to teaching. He was interested in improving the human condition in this world and formulated many principles upon which science is based. The following statement attributed to him might be considered one of the first formulations of scientific thinking: "When you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it. This is knowledge" (Confucius, *The Wisdom of Confucius* 43).

For Confucius, the most perfect person or the superior person was the person of *jen*. *Jen* makes human beings uniquely human and is the ultimate principle of human action. The Confucian Way (*Tao*) is essentially the way of *jen*, which has been translated many ways, e.g., perfect virtue, humanity, benevolence, and human-heartedness (Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*).

Jen may also be translated as love, magnanimity, etc., and is regarded as the key concept in Confucian moral philosophy, with *shu* [reciprocity] being a derivative of *jen*. (Yi-Pao Mei, *Moral Philosophies of China* 75–76, cited in Rost, *The Golden Rule* 53n)

It can be expressed in terms of conscientiousness and altruism, as in Confucius' statement, "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Koller, *Oriental Philosophies* 266). This is the golden rule or golden mean of Confucian teachings (Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*).

Confucius taught that we should be aware of our own limits. From *The Analects*, the most reliable source of Confucius' teachings, the point is made that Confucius "had no arbitrariness of opinion, no dogmatism, no obstinacy, and no egotism" (Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* 35). He did not think he had complete knowledge, nor did he think that such knowledge was possible. He felt one of people's errors was their failure to see their own faults and ignorance. On questions about metaphysics, Confucius was unwilling to give answers that limited ultimate reality. He thought it was impossible to speak objectively about things that were not objects (Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*).

Muhammad (circa A.D. 570–632)

Muhammad revolutionized life in Arabia and the East and has had tremendous influence on current thought and civilization. He brought new ways of thinking and behaving, and helped eliminate many harmful ideas and practices current during that time. The word *Islam* means submission to the Will of God. Submission is the central tenet of his teachings. Submission to the Will of God requires selflessness and detachment from the world. God transcends all things, and only by submitting our knowledge and will to God's can we discover truth and freedom. Muslims are

ones who surrender to God, as translated in this verse of the Qur’án, “Our God and your God is one, and to him are we self-surrendered” [Muslims] (Súrih 29:45). Followers of Muhammad’s teachings are to be God-centered and to believe everything comes from God and returns to God (Brandon, *Dictionary of Comparative Religion* 362).

The life of a devout Muslim is theocentric. As Muhammad taught him, he must be conscious every moment of his life that he has his being in God, that he is moved by the Will of God, from Him he comes and to Him he will return. (Balyúzí, *Muhammad and the Course of Islam* 156)

The Qur’án, the collected recitations of Muhammad, is replete with counsels on how to live a life freed of attachment to self and the world. The lie obligations of Muhammad’s teachings further one on the path of selflessness and detachment: faith in God and God’s Apostle, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and payment of alms.

Bahá’u’lláh calls “Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, and the most distinguished of God’s chosen Ones” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 40) and refers to his effect on his followers in the following passage:

Reflect for a while upon the behaviour of the companions of the Muhammadan Dispensation. Consider how, through the reviving breath of Muhammad, they were cleansed from the defilements of earthly vanities, were delivered from selfish desires, and were detached from all else but Him. Behold how they preceded all the peoples of the earth in attaining unto His holy Presence—the Presence of God Himself—how they renounced the world and all that is therein, and sacrificed freely and joyously their lives at the feet of that Manifestation of the All-Glorious. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 159 60)

The best known of the Muslim mystics are the Sufis. Farídú’d-Dín ‘Attár, one of the greatest of the Sufi poets, wrote about the stages of the journey of the soul in the *Mantiqut-Tayr* (c. 1177 C.E.), which has been translated into English under titles such as *Conference of the Birds* or *Parliament of the Birds*. Bahá’u’lláh’s *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* parallels very closely ‘Attár’s ideas and stages. ‘Attár describes the valleys that the birds must traverse in quest of their king. The first is the valley of search or quest, where tests are encountered and desires renounced. The valley of love follows, in which the seeker is consumed by longing for the beloved. In the valley of knowledge, one receives direct intuitive truth, and in the valley of detachment, the traveler is freed from passions and dependence. The fifth valley, called the valley of unification, is characterized by seeing things as one that previously seemed different. In the valley of bewilderment or astonishment, one sees knowledge in the new light of love. The final valley is called annihilation or death and represents the highest state of understanding, truth, and reality. This conforms with the Islamic belief in submission to the Will of God.

Commonalities

Conceptions similar to Bahá’u’lláh’s “poverty and nothingness”—a condition of being free of self and worldly attachments—have been proposed as the ultimate goal of life and the highest state of consciousness by the greatest seers, prophets, and philosophers of the world. The concept of poverty and nothingness—detachment from self and the world—as the ultimate state in the approach to God or higher reality, can be found in different ways and to different degrees in each of these great religions and philosophies.

Though each expressed the ultimate state of being differently, the theme was the same. We must rid ourselves of self and worldly attachments. As such, it could be a unifying concept and goal for all peoples. Islamic submission, Socratic ignorance, Buddhist right meditation and emptiness, Confucian *jen* and awareness of limits, and Christian faith and poverty, are all expressions of the same truth expressed by Bahá’u’lláh. This truth has been echoed in different forms by the many scholars and philosophers who have illuminated our thoughts throughout history.

Each of these outstanding individuals required and caused a transformation in the awareness of humankind, though on different levels and to different degrees depending on their station and role. Muhammad called for self-surrender; Socrates for a transformation in thinking; Buddha for meditative living; Confucius for education beyond mere learning; and Jesus for devotion to God that rules out worldly attachments. They all went beyond mere knowledge to transform human souls. All acknowledged their own limitations, though in different ways, and all lived a life that exemplified their teachings. In their own ways they served as lights to guide humanity for their times. Bahá’u’lláh serves in that same capacity today.

Closing Thoughts

First, lest anyone reading this essay be tempted to renounce the world and lead an ascetic life, some perspective might be in order. Shoghi Effendi cautions followers of Bahá’u’lláh not to interpret poverty and nothingness in a

literal way. After citing numerous passages encouraging a chaste and holy life, which includes the virtues of detachment and self-surrender, he states:

It must be remembered, however, that the maintenance of such a high standard of moral conduct is not to be associated or confused with any form of asceticism, or of excessive and bigoted puritanism. The standard inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh, seeks, under no circumstances, to deny anyone the legitimate right and privilege to derive the fullest advantage and benefit from the manifold joys, beauties, and pleasures with which the world has been so plentifully enriched by an All-Loving Creator. "Should a man," Bahá'u'lláh Himself reassures us, "wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no harm can befall him, if he alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God, for God hath ordained every good thing, whether created in the heavens or in the earth, for such of His servants as truly believe in Him. Eat ye, O people, of the good things which God hath allowed you, and deprive not yourselves from His wondrous bounties. Render thanks and praise unto Him, and be of them that are truly thankful." (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 33)

Second, the idea of poverty and nothingness, like many spiritual truths, contains many paradoxes that are beyond the scope of this essay. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi explains:

The more we search for ourselves, the less likely we are to find ourselves; and the more we search for God, and to serve our fellow-men. The more profoundly will we become acquainted with ourselves, and the more inwardly assured. This is one of the great spiritual laws of life. (Qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 115)

Third, the station of complete selflessness and detachment is not possible or practical for common humans (*Lights of Guidance* 114). This is the station of the prophets of God as suggested by Bahá'u'lláh:

...the station in which one dieth to himself and liveth in God. Divinity, whenever I mention it, indicateth My complete and absolute self-effacement. This is the station in which I have no control over mine own weal or woe nor over my life nor over my resurrection. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 234)

In closing, there is nothing virtuous in being poor or having nothing, rather the virtue is in not allowing the self or material things come between one and God. The love of self and things has been the greatest impediment to spiritual growth for all people. The poverty and nothingness referred to by Bahá'u'lláh really means being rich in God and the gifts of God's world. It is a goal that can never be completely achieved, but must always be pursued, for it leads to our greatest happiness and our highest good.

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