# Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashíd Riḍá:

# A Dialogue on the Bahá'í Faith

Translation and Introduction by Juan Ricardo Cole

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When Mírzá Ḥusayn ‘Alí Núrí (1817-92), entitled “Bahá'u'lláh,” was exiled in the summer of 1863 from Baghdád to Istanbul, it was natural that the Bábí movement, of which He was then the de facto head, should come face to face with the social issues confronting the Ottoman Empire. Between 1863 and 1868 Bahá'u'lláh not only founded a new religion (the Bahá'ís Faith) but in the process transformed Bábism from an eschatological protest movement into a religion aimed at reforming world society to accord with the new social, economic, and political realities then making their impact on the parts of the Ottoman Empire closest to Europe.[1]

Bahá'u'lláh began to consider highly charged political issues such as the propriety of adopting a constitutional monarchy, a parliamentarian form of government, and other European innovations. Even wider questions of how to stabilize the nationalistic state system that had emerged in Europe and was spreading to the rest of the world were treated by Bahá'í writings, which also paid attention to the responsibility of the state to ameliorate the condition of the poor, rather than squandering state monies in the pursuit of mindless arms race. In short, Bahá'u'lláh in His Ottoman exile developed a coherent program of institutional reform for societies that found themselves faced with the new world of the industrial revolution, the mass politics of the French Revolution, and the rise of industrial capital as the dominating factor in world affairs. In 1875 Bahá'u'lláh’s son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘Abbás (1844-1921) wrote a book aimed at convincing the Iranian government to adopt a series of modernist reforms based on Bahá'í ideals.[2]

The shift of focus from millenarianism to a social gospel made Bahá'í thought suddenly relevant to Muslim reformers who were confronted with many of the same problems. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met in later years with such figures as Midḥat Páshá, the Turkish supporter of constitutionalism, and Muḥammad ‘Abduh, the proponent of Islamic legal reform.[3] Muslim modernists often had an ambiguous attitude toward the Bahá'í Faith. On the one hand, the Bahá'ís produced eloquent and convincing arguments supporting the reformist position against the opposition of clerical conservatism and autocratic governments. On the other, the Bahá'í Faith had put itself outside the pale of Islám and so represented, in its own way, as much a competitor to Islám and a threat to its unity as did Christian evangelism. This ambivalence helps to explain why Jamálu’d-Dín-i Asabábádi “Afghání” (1839-97), the Iranian agitator and Pan-Islamist, felt it useful to keep in touch with the Bahá'ís in spite of his vehement and repeatedly expressed antipathy to the Bábí-Bahá'í movement.[4]

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[1] Cf. Nikki Keddie, “Is There a Middle East?”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4, No. 3 (July 1973), 267.

[2] For Bahá thought of this period see Bahá'u'lláh, *Alváh-i názilih-yi khiṭáb bi mulúk va ru’asá-yi arḍ* (Ṭihrán: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, B.E. 124/A.D. 1967)—partially translated into English in *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the Kings and Leaders of the World* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1967)—‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *ar-Risáleh al-madaniyyah* (Cairo: Kurdistán Science Press, A.H. 1329) masterfully translated into English by Marzieh Gail and Ali–Kuli Khan as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970).

[3] Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*¸ rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 193.

[4] Afghání spent much of his life fighting British colonialism in Muslim countries; his radical ideas made him attractive to a number of idealistic young Egyptian reformers, including Muḥammad ‘Abduh. See Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamál ad-Dín ‘al-Afghání’: a political*

Mixed feelings about the Bahá'ís can be clearly seen in the reformist Salafiyyah movement in Egypt. Afghání's own negative feelings toward it do not seem to have affected his student Muḥammad 'Abduh, who defended the Bahá'ís to his on student, Muḥammad Rashíd Riḍá (1865-1935).[5] Riḍá was born in a village near Tripoli in Ottoman Syria (now Lebanon). He began his higher studies at the National Islamic School founded in Tripoli by Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Jisr (1845-1909) and went to Cairo to study with 'Abduh in 1897. He originally wanted to join Afghání in Istanbul, but the latter's death determined him to seek out his most famous student, 'Abduh. In 1898 Riḍá began a journal, *al-Manár* (*The Lighthouse*) as a forum for his ideas on the reform of Muslim society. The subject of the Bahá'í Faith was treated several times in this journal, and the hostile stance Riḍá took against the Bahá'ís there can be seen in germ in an early conversation with 'Abduh.[6] A translation of this conversation, which Riḍá recorded, will be given below.

Riḍá's conversation with 'Abduh concerning the Bahá'í Faith came near the beginning of their relationship, soon after Riḍá's arrival in Cairo. It demonstrates a wide divergence in their outlooks and tendencies of thought. 'Abduh's admiration for 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Bahá'í movement was very great, at least as of 1897, and it is difficult to believe that he was as uninformed about the nature of the Bahá'í Faith as Riḍá makes him out to be. We now know that 'Abduh was little concerned with orthodoxy per se, and if it is true that he later turned against the Bahá'ís, this was more likely because he wished to protect his reputation than because he belatedly recognized that there was a great difference between Sunní Islám and the Bahá'í Faith.[7] 'Abduh did, however, seem unaware that Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb claimed to bring new religious laws and so to be independent Messengers of God. He referred to the movement as a sect (*ṭá'ifah*) of Islám. It may well be that Riḍá managed to convince 'Abduh that the Bahá'í Faith was a wholly new religion, and so discredited it for him as a path to the reform of Islám itself. However, Riḍá's avowed purpose in devoting several pages of his biography of 'Abduh to the latter's views on the Bahá'ís was to clear his mentor's name of any connection with them. It is thus possible that he exaggerated 'Abduh's later disillusionment with the Bahá'í Faith.

Whatever the case may be, it seems clear that in 1897 'Abduh thought the Bahá'í movement the most progressive and creative Muslim group and 'Abdu'l-Bahá a truly great man. It is possible that 'Abduh himself felt the influence of Bahá'í ideas. He defends such ideas as restrictions on polygamy and the unity of religions. His presentation of the theory of progressive revelation is very similar to the Bábí-Bahá'í schema, and the fact that it came up during a conversation about the Bahá'ís might be an unwitting indication that it was partially derived from them.[8]

That Bahá'í ideas were being taken seriously by intellectuals in turn-of-the-century Egypt is not surprising. Iranian Bahá'ís, most of them merchants, began settling in Egypt in the late 1860s; by the 1890s there was a thriving, though numerically small, community in Alexandria and Cairo. These

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*biography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972.) The attempts of an earlier generation of Afghání scholars to explain his dislike of Bábism is terms of his strict Sunní orthodoxy (for example, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 14) can now be safely dismissed. Afghání was an Iranian Shí'ite by upbringing and an agnostic philosopher by conviction. See Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1966). An article on Bábism attributed to Afghání was published in Buṭrus Bustání, ed., *Da'iratu'l-ma'árif al-'arabiyyah* (Beirut: n.p., 1881), vol. 5.

[5] 'Abduh came to Cairo from a Delta village in 1869 to study at al-Azhar. He joined Afghání's circle in the 1870s and became extremely politicized. He was exiled from Egypt after the 'Urábi revolt and spent some time in Beirut and Europe. Toward the end of the 1880s he apparently turned his back on the radicalism of his youth, politically dissociated himself from Afghání's policies, and returned to Egypt to concentrate on educational and language reform. He was favored by the British rulers of Egypt and appointed Muftí of the country in 1899, giving him a platform from which to promulgate his Islamic version of liberalism. His reformist ideas have been adopted and elaborated upon by great numbers of Muslim modernists.

[6] I am currently working on a paper on Riḍá's polemic against the Bahá'í Faith in *al-Manár*. For Riḍá's thought see Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashíd Riḍá* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1966) and Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, Chapter IX.

[7] 'Abduh's heterodoxy was first suspected by Lord Cromer; see his *Modern Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 599. See also Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh*, p. 45.

[8] Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risálat at-tawḥíd* (Cairo: at-Manár Press, A.H. 1373), pp. 166-72. This important work has been translated by Ishaq Musa'ad and Kenneth Cragg as *The Theology of Unity*(London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

communities were reinforced by the arrival in 1894 or 1895 of Mírzá Abú'l-Faḍl Gulpáygání, the renowned Bahá'í scholar.[9] Gulpáygání (1844-1914) was sent by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Egypt from Palestine, where he had spent ten months after his return from 'Ishqábád in Russia. He began to establish himself among students and professors at the Azhar Mosque College as an expert in geography, history, dialectical theology (*kalám*), and Qur'án commentary and managed to attract some students to his circle. They undoubtedly believed him to be a Shi'ite, and he did nothing to dispel the idea.

In 1896 when a Pan-Islamist follower of Jamálu'd-Dín-i Afghání assassinated Náṣiru'd-Dín Sháh, the Iranian Muslims in Cairo were convinced that the Bahá'ís were at fault, and there was some sentiment that a wholesale massacre of the Bahá'ís in Egypt should be carried out in revenge.[10] Mírzá Mihdí Khán Za'imu'd-Dawlih, a knowledgeable enemy of the Bahá'í Faith was among those agitating against the Bahá'ís.[11] However, the ambassador forestalled this action, and it was soon established that the Bahá'ís were not involved in the assassination.

Soon there, Mihdí Khán openly accused Gulpáygání of being a Bahá'í, to which the latter replied that he was indeed and not ashamed of it.[12] This open proclamation of his faith must have made it easier for him to comply with the request of the editors of *al-Muqtaṭaf*, a popular secular magazine, that he write an article explaining the Bahá'í Faith.[13] This was probably the first time that the Bahá'ís in the Middle East were able to utilize the press to publicize their faith.

Rashíd Riḍá, then a student in Tripoli, read the *al-Muqtaṭaf* article and with a group of friends wrote a letter to Gulpáygání protesting its contents. This was the beginning of Riḍá's antipathy to the Bahá'í Faith. Later, when he arrived in Cairo, he met with Gulpáygání and was unhappy with the latter's exposition of the divinity of Bahá'u'lláh. As a strict Sunní Muslim, Riḍá was unable or unwilling to understand the doctrine of theophany (*ẓuhúru'lláh*) preached by the Bahá'ís. It smacked to him of incarnationism and seemed to make the Bahá'í Faith far more similar to Christianity than to the transcendalist faith of Islám.

Gulpáygání subsequently published his book, *al-Farà'id*, in Cairo, and because of this and other writings, eventually a declaration that he had departed from Islám (*takfír*) into unbelief was issued by some 'ulamá. Under an Islamic government that could have meant his death, as this was a capital offense under Islamic law. However, Egypt at that time was ruled by the British. Not all the students and teachers at the Azhar were quite so zealously orthodox. Indeed, Gulpáygání managed to convert some fourteen students and teachers.[14] Some of them were subsequently expelled from the Azhar, at least one at Rashíd Riḍá's insistence. Later another of Gulpáygání's books was published: *ad-Durar al-Bahiyyah (Glorious Pearls)*. This work was in Arabic, and it attracted the favorable notice of nationalist spokesman Muṣṭafá Kámil.[15] The book incensed Rashíd Riḍá, who did everything he could to ensure that it was not favorably reviewed in the Cairo press.

From Riḍá's testimony the three most striking aspects of Gulpáygání's message were his insistence that Islamic society and religion be reformed; his conviction that reform could successfully be undertaken only by a new Messenger of God; and a millenarian belief in the imminent destruction of the

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[9] See Rúḥu'lláh Mihrábkhání, *Sharḥ-i aḥvál-i jináb-i Mírzá Abú'l-Faḍá'il Gulpáygání* (Ṭihrán: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, B.E. 131/A.D. 1974) and Ali-Kuli Khan and Marzieh Gail, "Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl in America," in *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Vol. IX 1940-1944*, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945), pp. 855-60.

[10] Mihrábkhání, *Sharḥ-i aḥvál*, pp. 259-61.

[11] Ibid.. p. 260. In 1903 Mihdí Khán published a polemic against the Bahá'ís entitled *Miftáḥ báb al-abwáb* with Rashíd Riḍá's help.

[12] Mihrábkhání, *Sharḥ-i aḥvál*, p. 261.

[13] Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh al-Írání, "al-Báb wa'l-Bábiyyah,' *al-Muqtaṭaf*, 20 No. 9 (Sept. 1896), 650-57. On the character of this journal see Nadia Faraq, "al-Muqtataf, 1876-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Oxford Univ., 1969.)

[14] The list, drawn up by Ḥusayn Rúhí (1878-1960, is given in Mihrábkhání *Sharḥ- aḥvál*, pp. 249-50.

[15] Kámil (1874-1908) was a French-trained lawyer and militant nationalist who devoted himself to the cause of expelling the British from Egypt. In 1900 he founded the *al-Liwá'* newspaper, and in 1907, al-Ḥizb al-Waṭaní, a political party that demanded the immediate evacuation of the British. See Ibrahim Amín Ghali, *L'Égypte nationaliste e libérale de Moustapha Kamel à Saad Zaghloul (1892-1927)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

world, particularly Europe. Gulpáygání's ideas about the theophany must be understood against the background of Bahá'í theology, in which God's essence is transcendent and unknowable, while His attributes can be reflected on earth by a Manifestation of God (*mazhar-i-iláhí*). Riḍá confused this Shi'ite Islamic doctrine with the Christian dogma of the Incarnation. The appearance of such a theophany helped Middle Eastern Bahá'ís in the nineteenth and early twentieth century explain the rapid and sweeping changes taking place in their societies and the world at large. The changes were understood as concomitants of the eschatological advent of a new theophany though whose teachings traditional society could be transformed to accord with changed social conditions. In late nineteenth- and very early twentieth-century Egypt the Bahá'í Faith seemed largely to appeal to a small number of merchants and 'ulamá, who were looking for a means of asserting their cultural identity against Europe. The Bahá'í Faith seems to have struck them as exactly the sort of revitalization of Islamic principles that could allow Muslims to restore the greatness of their civilization. For members of the traditional lower middle class, the 'ulamá and the bazaar elements, who were hurt by the competition of European trade, Gulpáygání's idea that God was about to rain down his wrath upon Europe cannot have been particularly distressing.

Riḍá as a contemporary observer, apparently felt that the Bahá'í Faith was appealing enough to constitute a threat to Sunní Islám. Only this can explain his steady stream of polemics against it. But, in point of fact, Cairo and Alexandria did not prove to be particularly fertile ground for the Bahá'ís, who never grew to more than a few hundred in either city. While a nationalist spokesman for the lower middle class like Muṣṭafá Kámil was impressed by Bahá'í ideas, he did not join the new religion. Moreover, the competing nationalist current he headed was to be far more representative of Egyptian social movements in the twentieth century than the Bahá'í Faith.

Between the nationalist tradition running from Kámil through Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Adventist social gospel of the Bahá'ís stood the reformist Islamic Salafiyyah movement headed by Rashíd Riḍá. As an advocate of moderate social and religious reform, Riḍá rejected the Bahá'ís as extremists. He not only bitterly criticized them for accepting the appearance of a prophet after Muḥammad (Muslim doctrine asserts that he is the last prophet) but also assailed them for their tendency to behave outwardly as Muslims while inwardly professing a wholly new faith. He claimed that 'Abdu'l-Bahá deliberately misled Muslim leaders by telling them that the Bahá'í Faith was simply a reform of Shi'ite Islám. In the discretion, doubt derived largely from the repressive atmosphere of religious intolerance in which the Bahá'ís were forced to operate, a discretion that Riḍá perceived as secretiveness, he saw a modern recrudescence of the esotericism of the Ismá'ílís. The subsequent history of the Bahá'í Faith belies this impression, but it was undoubtedly an easy one to form in turn-of-the-century Egypt. The claim by Bahá'í leaders that their faith was a reform of Shí'ism was no doubt an honest self-perception.

Riḍá was particularly angered by Bahá'u'lláh's promulgation of a new law concerning marriage, limiting the number of wives to two rather than the Qur'anic four.[16] Reform for Riḍá could only mean a more perfect understanding of and adherence to the immutable religious law of the Prophet Muḥammad. Riḍá felt that in revealing a new law Bahá'u'lláh had chosen to abandon Islám rather than reform it.

The following is a translation of a transcription of the conversation between Riḍá and 'Abduh recorded in Riḍá's diary. Riḍá included it in his biography of 'Abduh and framed it with a clearly biased

[16] See Bahá'u'lláh, *al Kitáb al-aqdas* (Bombay: n.p., n.d.), p. 64.; cf. *A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1973), pp. 39, 47, 59.

'Abdu'l-Bahá later interpreted the verse concerning polygamy in the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* to mean that only monogamy was actually permissible since true justice was impossible in polygamy. This argument was developed by Muḥammad 'Abduh and his circle. It was made openly by Qásim Amín (1865-1908) in his book on the emancipation of women published in 1899; see Muḥammad 'Imárah, ed., *al-A'mál al-kámilah li Qásim Amín* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publication, 1976), II, 92-93.

and polemical account.[17] However, the chapter retains a good deal of historical value for students of the Bahá'í Faith, and the conversation itself shows clearly ‘Abduh’s sympathies for this movement and its ideals at that time. Riḍá begins by saying that he had become interested in the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths while a student of Islamic sciences in Tripoli, Syria (now Lebanon). Determined to investigate them, he met with Gulpáygání on his arrival in Cairo in 1897 and says he debated with him repeatedly. Riḍá claims to have had in his possession a letter from Gulpáygání in which the latter openly calls people to the Bahá'í Faith. Riḍá complains that the Bahá'ís were forbidden to try to spread their religion in the Ottoman Empire, including Egypt,[18] according to the terms prescribed by the Empire “when it allowed them to live in ‘Akká, to move about freely, and to reside in all its lands.” Riḍá was confused here, however, since the Bahá'í leadership was exiled to ‘Akká rather than being “allowed: to live there, and the movement of Bahá'ís was quite restricted. The idea he presents that there was some sort of agreement between the Bahá'ís and the Ottomans appears to have no basis in fact.

Riḍá claims to have found ‘Abduh rather uninformed about the Bahá'í Faith but believing in what he had been told about it by “’Abbás Effendi.”[19] He says that when ‘Abduh was living in Beirut (presumably in the late 1880s) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá more than once came to Beirut from Haifa and would make a point of attending some of Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s study sessions. Bahá'í sources, however, speak of only one encounter between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and ‘Abduh, and the matter of how intimate the two men were bears more investigation. After ‘Abduh returned to Cairo, he continued to correspond with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Riḍá said that he had in his possession some of the latter’s letters to ‘Abduh.

After the conversation was over, Riḍá remarked in his diary that ‘Abduh “asserts the necessity of reform, but the immoderation of the reformers. And were it not for this immoderation of the Bábís [Bahá'ís], he would have liked to help them.” Riḍá lamented that ‘Abduh had never read Afghání’s *Arab Encyclopedia* article on the Bábís and seemed to think of them as simply a reformist movement within Shi‘ite Islám. Riḍá claims that Gulpáygání once explained to him the Bahá'í doctrine of Bahá'u'lláh’s divinity and ended by saying “He is God, there is no God but Him” and by applying various names of God to Bahá'u'lláh. Riḍá seems to be reporting in garbled fashion the Bahá'í doctrine that Bahá'u'lláh was the manifestation of the names and attributes of God. He says that, when he reported to ‘Abduh this Bahá'í belief in the divinity of Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abduh turned against the Bahá'ís and considered them to be extremist Shí‘ites. Given ‘Abduh’s prejudice against Shí‘ites, this is not impossible, especially in view of the garbled way in which the Bahá'í doctrine was communicated to him.

Riḍá then discuses the articles against the Bahá'í Faith that he later published in his journal, in which he attempted to disprove the Bahá'í assertion that the persistence and growth of a religious movement is proof that it possesses some intrinsic truth. Riḍá argued in utilitarian fashion that any religious movement, no matter how false, could be kept going by an efficient propaganda machine. He claims that ‘Abduh was impressed with these later articles, in spite of the fact that he had earlier defended the Bahá'í view. Riḍá says that ‘Abduh also liked a later article in which he attempted to stress sectarian divisions within the Bahá'í Faith. Even in Riḍá’s time, however, it was clear to most observers that the vast majority of the Bahá'ís chose to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh’s Book of the Covenant (*Kitáb-i-‘Ahd*)

‘Abduh and Riḍá were two of the more influential Sunní Muslim thinkers of their day. ‘Abduh’s own analyses have formed a basis for liberal Islamic reformist thought throughout the Sunní world. Riḍá’s influence was more circumscribed, but his version of the Salafiyyah movement was highly influential, especially in North Africa. His journal, *al-Manár* had a wide following, and he appealed more to the lower middle class than ‘Abduh, who was more favored by the upper middle class. With the resurgence of lower middle class Islamic fundamentalism in several Sunní countries in recent years Riḍá

[17] Muḥammad Rashíd Riḍá, *Ta’ríkh al-ustádh al-imám ash-shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh* (Cairo: al-Manár Press, 1931), I, 930-39.
[18] Then under British occupation.
[19] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

may once again become influential. What these two men had to say about the Bahá'í Faith in Cairo one evening in 1897, therefore, remains relevant even today.

## Translation

*Riḍá*: (The first conversation that took place between us concerning them [the Bahá'ís] occurred at the end of a discussion of jurisprudents and Ṣúfís. When I noted the similarity between Ṣúfism and extremist Shí'ism (*al-báṭiniyyah*) in the use of esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) [of the Qur'án], I asked him his opinion of the Bábí [-Bahá'í] Faith.)

*'Abduh*: "This sect is the only one that strives so that sciences and arts might be acquired by the Muslims. There are learned and wise men among its adherents, but I do not know the truth of their school, nor do I know if the incarnationism and the like which is attributed to them is attributed rightly so or not. Rather, I find it exceedingly strange."

*Riḍá*: (Then I asked him about Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh al-Íráni.[20]

*'Abduh*: "I have heard of him recently and that he is an historian and a man of refinement, but I haven't met him."

*Riḍá*:"Yes, he excels in history, and has traveled a great deal. He is of refined character." I mentioned all that I knew of his characteristics and remarked, "He appears to me to be one of their propagandists." (Then I asked him about 'Abbás Effendi:) "I hear that he excels in religious science and in diplomacy (*as-siyásah*), and that he is wise enough to satisfy all who seek his company."

*'Abduh*: "Yes, 'Abbás Effendi transcends all that. He is, in fact, a great man; he is the man to whom it is right to apply that epithet."

*Riḍá*: "I have met with Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh several times and have debated with him, finding that he presents as evidence for the soundness of his teachings the period of their duration, as well as their diffusion and growth. He protests by means of Qur'án verses that only the truth can endure and persevere, as 'Surely falsehood is ever certain to perish' and 'To Him is the call of truth,' etc."[21]

*'Abduh*: "And I say that only truth and good persevere and endure, and that evil and falsehood do not endure. If they should spread and grow, even so the people's propagandizing for them will not be so long-lived that it would be right to protest against this principle."

(He saw that I had misgivings about his words, and continued:) "I do not assert that whatever is stable is true and good; I speak only of that which possesses a spiritual life and growth. The endurance of spiritual things is not like that of a stone which one finds in a place, and which no one moves, or as a mountain and the like, the continuing endurance of which is due to the lack of anyone to move it rather than to a vital power which holds it back from oblivion.

"As for that which possesses life, such as the call to a religion or school, it will neither persevere nor endure save if the call be intrinsically true, even if some degree of falsehood encompasses it in some of its phases. For this is an accidental quality that cannot prevent its endurance and continuance, unlike the call that is false in its foundation. For this reason the call of no one who claimed to be a prophet after out Prophet—may the peace and blessings of God be upon Him—ever endured, because he is the Seal of Prophets. Even were the fact that he is the Seal of the Prophets not in the Qur'án, the very nature of existence would point to it merely on deliberation upon the message and teachings of the Qur'án."

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[20] Mírzá Abú'l-Faḍl Gulpáygání (1844-1914)
[21] Qur'án 17:81; 13:14.

(He coined a metaphor for this, remarking) "The entire human race is like a single member of it, whose father and trainer speaks to him in every phase of his life according to the level of his intellect and the needs of his age. In such wise did God deal with mankind. He addressed the people of every Messenger according to their intellectual level and the condition of their society at that time. As man progressed, God ordained more advanced religious laws for him, until He sealed them with the mission of the Seal of the Prophets, which s the religion for mankind's maturity."

(Then he explained the matter in a way such that we may dispense with it here because he set it down in the *Treatise on Divine Unity*, in the investigation of the progress of the religious, the seal of which is Islam insofar as it is God's message to man at the age of his maturity. The *Treatise* had not yet been printed when he spoke these words to me, nor had its composition been completed.)[22]

*Riḍá*: "The followers of the Báb and Bahá' were attracted by them when they saw a miraculous rational faculty in them.[23] Thus they followed them, even though this is something natural. It has been well-known in nature for some individuals to possess a miraculous rational faculty (such as the late Czar of Russia). Thus at some times persons exist with miraculous rational faculties, and if any of them arises with a call to something such as a religion, school (*madhhab*), or a Ṣúfí order (*ṭaríqah*), many people follow him. They are attracted by him and admire his impressive thought, perceptions, and words, even though his call is to something unreasonable, and even though he cannot establish a proof for it."

*'Abduh*: "I believe that when someone with a miraculous rational faculty calls people to a good things and has success in this he must be supported by a Spirit from God. For God does not bring this rational faculty into existence on a whim."

*Riḍá*: "Do you believe this on the basis of conscience alone, or on that of rational evidence?"

*'Abduh*: "No, it is rational. History from beginning to end witnesses to it and gives evidence for it. Indeed, the Prophets and the founders of the true schools were all of this sort."

*Riḍá*: "Your former and subsequent statements are identical to what the Bábís allege, and you do not contradict them save in one thing, which is really everything: You have confirmed that no change is possible in the principles and religious law of Islám. For it is that whereby God addressed mankind at the time of his attainment to maturity, and in the phase of his intellectual perfection, beyond which there is no higher phase requiring another divine legislation for his education and perfection. Rather, He has entrusted man in all that comes thereafter to his own personal endeavor (*ijtihád*) and self-reliance. But the import of the words of their propagandists such as Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh, according to what is indicated in the letter he wrote to some of our brethren, clarifying the article he published in *al-Muqtaṭaf,* is either that Bahá' is a renewer of the Islamic religious law or that he is the bringer of a new religious law.[24] Hey support each of these standpoints with Qur'án verses and Traditions. Their assertion that it is possible for there to be a renewer is the first stage in their invitation of Muslims to their religion. If the one who is invited accepts this, they shift him to the second position. Their way of making propaganda and interpreting Qur'án verses and prophetic Traditions according to their base desires is like the way of their forbears among the esotericists, such as the Ismá'ílís, etc. They say that the objective of their religion, or its principles and intentions (*maqáṣid*), is the unification of the religions. They look into the books of the Jews and the Christians and interpret them the way they interpret the Qur'án. Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh claims, as I have heard from him, that the Book of every religious community contains an

[22] See footnote 8 above.

[23] Riḍá later made the following interjection in his notes. "It would have been more right to have said, 'unusual psychological states and strange statements.' "

[24] See Note 13 above. Riḍá notes here: "Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh had written an article for the *al-Muqtaṭaf*, the subject of which was 'The Báb and Bábism,' asserting that it was an historical piece. I read it with some of the other students of religious knowledge in Tripoli, and we perceived a contradiction of the Islamic law therein. So we wrote to our brother, Shaykh Ismá'íl al-Ḥáfiẓ, who was living in the vicinity of the Azhar, asking him to inform Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh of our disapproval. He was so informed and wrote a letter clarifying his intent. [This] included what we [later] learned from him: that the Bahá'í Faith is a new religion and that they propagandize for it secretly, like the propaganda of the esotericists before them."

exposition of all that will befall that community; that the Gospel contains an exposition of the current condition of Europe and that the Europeans shall be entirely annihilated. Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh appealed for evidence to the second chapter of 2 Peter concerning the appearance of false teachers who will spread about the heresy of perdition and who will attract to themselves swift perdition, promising liberty while they are slaves of corruption, etc."

*'Abduh*: "If Peter had known what was to befall Christianity and reported it, he would have also reported that which is more important than the appearance of Protestantism and everything else which has befallen it—that is, its alteration and transformation into idolatry. For Christianity changed into idolatry in the age of Constantine, three hundred years after Christ. Constantine was a pagan king who claimed to be Christian that he might call on the support of its adherents against his enemies … and he succeeded in this." (He added that the term 'liberty' in the Epistle of Peter does not have the commonly known sense it now bears.)

*Riḍá*: (After a long discussion of the history of Christianity, I gave him Mírzá Faḍlu'lláh's handwritten letter and left. I did not meet him again until a journey to Upper Egypt from which I returned toward the end of Sha'bán. I visited him on the second night of Ramaḍán, but we found no time for religious stud because of the many visitors. Then I visited him on Friday afternoon, the sixth of Ramaḍán, and he received me in his bedroom-study. The first thing I asked him about was Faḍlu'lláh's letter, and I perceived that he thought well of it. [I aid:])

"Yes, its words and style are good, especially its elucidation of the Muslims' need for reform. But he mentions two stages of the call for reform. The first is the reform of the Islamic religion, which is reasonable and acceptable. It is this that we assert and strive for and for the sake of which I desire to begin a periodical publication. The second is the need for a new revelation. He has expressed this ambiguously, as in his statement that its comprehension depends on an understanding of 'the Resurrection and the folding up of the heavens of the religions.' His reader will not understand his intent here. But we have discussed it with him and learned that they believe the Resurrection to have occurred and that all the descriptions of it in the Qur'an have been realized—including the rolling up of the heavens as in God's word, 'And the heavens are rolled up in His right hand.'[25] For them the heavens are the religions, and the seven heavens are Brahmanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islám." Then I mentioned others of their doctrines and Qur'an interpretations, which contain things even less likely than the interpretations of their forebears, the Ismá'ílís and the Fáṭimids in Egypt.

*'Abduh*: "What need is there for such distance from the truth and the right, and for this talk which reason cannot accept? I never understood any of this from 'Abbás Effendi. He only explained that they have undertaken to reform the *Shí'ite* sect and bring it closer to the Sunnís. In reality, the Shí'ite school is ——.[26] They are the sect most in need of reform. But, most unfortunately, none among us arise as reformers save that they depart from moderation into extremism, and the call cannot succeed with extremism. The Wahhábís undertook reform, and their sect would be good were it not for their extremism and excess. What need is there for their call that the tomb of the Prophet be destroyed? Or their assertion that all other Muslims are infidels? Or that they must be extirpated?[27] Yes, there is nothing wrong with extremism in speech or address for the sake of influencing or attracting people, or frightening and deterring them. But not everything that is said is to be written down and acted upon. I often say things in study or preaching sessions that I do not wish to be written down and transmitted

[25] Qur'án 39:67.

[26] Riḍá notes: "Here he said something he did not allow me to take down during his life-time, and I see the wisdom of leaving it out now that he has passed away. But I will say that his judgment on them is more severe than that of ibn Taymíyyah."

[27] "This is what was commonly (thought) of them in Egypt and all the lands of the Ottoman Empire. But then we learned from their books that the people had exaggerated their excesses, calumniating them to please the Ottoman State. They did not destroy the above-mentioned tomb, nor did their 'ulamá pronounce all the Muslim infidels." This note, a later addition of Riḍá's, reflects his appreciation of the strict reformism of the Wahhábís.

from me. Their only value is their immediate effect on the soul of the one who is addressed." (He then asked me what it was that I rejected in Mírzá Faḍl's letter.)

*Riḍá*: (I mentioned to him that, first of all, there is the matter of polygamy and concubinage and the law of Bahá' allows only two wives.[28])

*'Abduh*: (He began to explain the evils of polygamy and concubinage and the Muslims' departure from the guidance of the Holy Law thereby into) "excess in striving mightily after bas desire without taking notice of the religious aim. This custom developed in 'Abbásid times and has reached into our own age, to the extent that you even find hundreds of these concubines with the Sulṭán of the Turks and others. From this have sprung many corrupt practices that were highly influential in cuing the weakness of the Muslim community and its fall to the nadir wherein it now subsists. Let alone the selling of female Muslims from Circassia or the Sudan without the least semblance of religious legality!"

(Then he expanded on this and referred to the destruction of households resulting from polygamy through the extension of the mutual hostility of the two wives, or more, to their children, making it impossible to train them up properly. He said in regard to sulṭáns and rulers:) "If this large number of women is in any of their palaces, when will their thoughts become purified such that their deliberation upon the affairs of the Muslim community will improve?" (He only digressed so lengthily on this subject because he thought me one of those who think well of polygamy. This was at the beginning of our relationship. Then we returned to the subject of the Bahá'í Faith.)

*Riḍá*: "They assert the soundness of all the religions and religious scriptures and call all peoples of all religious communities to their religion, that the word of mankind may become one thereby. They give as evidence, in calling the people of each religion to their faith, what is in the scriptures of the former, particularly the Pentateuch, the Gospel, and the Qur'an. It has become apparent to me that their way is wiser than that of the Masons. The Masons found it advisable not to differentiate between the religions in membership in their association, claiming that it does not touch on religion, even though their objective is the destruction of all the religions. But the Bahá'ís assert the soundness of each religion in itself and seek evidence within it for their own religion, which abrogates whatever preceded it."

*'Abduh*: "Drawing the religions closer together is among the things which the Islamic faith brought: 'Say: O people of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you.'"[29] (But he found it strange that this group presents evidence for the missions of the Báb and Bahá' from the heavenly scriptures.

[28] See footnote 16 above.
[29] Qur'án 3:64.