

The Hindu Concept of God: Unity in Diversity

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Abstract

This paper correlates Hindu concepts of God to those found in the Semitic religious tradition and the Bahá'í Faith. By demonstrating the fundamental unity behind these beliefs, different schools of thought within Hinduism are harmonised. Also highlighted, is the spiritual principle of unity in diversity, common both to the metaphysical world-view of Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith. It is suggested that this principle might form the basis by which Hindu and Bahá'í beliefs can come together and further their common goal of uniting the world's spiritual traditions.

1. Introduction

Progressive revelation is the Bahá'í principle that all religions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of mankind, and that each religion is suited to the time and place in which it is revealed. A common misconception about this principle is that the Bahá'í Faith somehow replaces the religions of the past. Since the Bahá'í Faith claims to be the latest religion in this process, it is tempting to conclude that the former religions are no longer relevant to the world's needs, or that they will not play an important role in the future. But a careful investigation into the Bahá'í writings indicates that this conclusion is not implied by the principle of progressive revelation. Moreover, a study into world religious history also indicates that there are limits to understanding the religions of the world merely by placing them in chronological order.

There are passages in the Bahá'í writings that warn against assigning a position of inherent superiority to the Bahá'í Faith with respect to other religions. Shoghi Effendi, the appointed interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings, states that:

“Let no one, however, mistake my purpose. The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. 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 clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.”¹

This passage not only makes it clear that all religions, including the Bahá'í Faith, have “identical aims”, are “complementary in their functions”, are “indispensable in their value to mankind”, but that the Bahá'í Faith must assist someone of another Faith to “obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose”. This means that Bahá'ís are not in competition with members of other Faiths, vying for spiritual

¹ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 57-58

converts. Neither do they seek to “undermine the basis of any man's allegiance” to his or her own spiritual tradition.

The relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to other religions and the nature of progressive revelation is further elaborated in another passage by Shoghi Effendi. Here the danger of relegating other religions to an inferior status is explicitly highlighted, and the fundamental unity of the Bahá'í Faith to all religions is described in terms of the “evolution of one religion”,

“Nor does the Bahá'í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfilment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. It neither seeks to obscure their Divine origin, nor to dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements. It can countenance no attempt that seeks to distort their features or to stultify the truths which they instill. Its teachings do not deviate a hairbreadth from the verities they enshrine, nor does the weight of its message detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire. Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to co-ordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer

has graphically expressed it, "are doomed not to die, but to be reborn..."²

The Bahá'í approach is one that emphasises the underlying unity behind all religions. It cannot compete with other Faiths because it believes all religions, including itself, to be part of an "evolution of one religion". It aims at "restating the fundamentals" of each Faith, to "reconcile their aims", to "reinvigorate their life", to "demonstrate their oneness", to "restore the pristine purity of their teachings" and to "assist in the realization of their highest aspirations". The task facing Bahá'ís is to bring about the rebirth of the other religions, not to supersede them. This point cannot be overemphasised. Clearly the goal of establishing the unity of religions will involve Bahá'ís and people of other religions working together. This means that each religion will have a part to play in the spiritual future of mankind.

In its goal to unite the world's religious Faiths, to "demonstrate their oneness", the Bahá'í Faith is seeking to do something which has not hitherto been attempted. All religious Faiths have up till now, at least within the orbit of their own sacred scriptures, confined their message to a specific group of people or religious tradition. Of course, many of them hint at a future day, a promised day when peace and unity will be established amongst all people, but that is not the focus of their message. The message in the Hebrew scriptures is largely directed to the Israelites, and its implication for the Gentiles is only hinted at. Christ spoke first and foremost to the Jewish tradition, it was only later taken to the Gentile world by the apostle St Paul. In Islam, the message is for the most part, directed to the People of the Book, that is, to the Christians and Jews. These three religions make up what is known as the Semitic line of religions. They have a common tradition bound together by race and prophecy.

Taking a broad perspective, world religious history would appear to be composed of different lines of religious development: the Semitic tradition, the Indian tradition, the Chinese tradition, and many more native

² Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 114-116

religious traditions, all of which are largely confined both in their written scriptures and oral traditions to a specific race or culture. The Bahá'í aim of establishing the fundamental unity of religions involves widening "the basis" of existing religions by universalising them, so that their "first and everlasting principles" can be shared by people from all traditions.

It would appear that religions have not only been developing chronologically, that is sequentially, the latest one referencing and building on the previous ones, but they have also been developing in parallel. The religions in the Semitic tradition for instance, do not to make any reference to the religions which grew up in India and vice versa.

The sequential side of progressive revelation is most clearly illustrated within each religious tradition. On the other hand, the complementary nature of religious truth is visible between different religious traditions. They are by no means mutually exclusive. From the Bahá'í point of view, it is only the secondary aspects of religions that differ, that is in terms of their social laws and observances, but in their fundamental spiritual aspects, they are one. Religions within the same tradition also exhibit complementarity. Interaction between religions of different traditions has also occurred and their history has not been entirely independent, so the picture is not a simple one. The main point here is that religions have developed both sequentially and in parallel.

The Bahá'í Faith's relationship to other religions might be illustrated by two analogies. In the Bahá'í writings, the spiritual development of mankind as a whole is likened to the growth of a human being, who grows through the various stages of childhood, youth and adulthood³. Rejecting the conclusion that each religion is somehow superseded or inferior to the successive one, it is stated that, "does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child or youth perishes"⁴. During childhood, a human being learns fundamental principles which stay with him for the rest of his life, arguably, childhood is the most important period. Most of us in childhood and youth go through various experiences, learn different principles, which are not related together. It is

³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 114, pp 164-165

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 114

only usually during the adult phase of our lives that the different experiences of our past are pieced together, put into a wider perspective. It is only usually as an adult that the different lessons of the past acquire a greater meaning. Of course, each phase of our life is equally important, and at any one stage, we are still the same person. Along each phase of our growth, we are discovering more about ourselves. But the consciousness of our self-identity does not fully mature until we are adults, this is the time that we are best able to integrate our different experiences together. The Bahá'í claim is that mankind as a whole is approaching the phase of maturity or adulthood, and is at present caught in the tumultuous phase of the rebellious youth⁵. All religions have taught us fundamental lessons which will always remain, but this is the time in our collective history when all these different past experiences will be brought together.

Another analogy implied in the Bahá'í writings is of different territories on the earth's surface⁶. Viewed from the earth's surface, each territory appears to be separate from the other. Even when standing from the peak of a high mountain, a specific landscape comes into view. The landscape we see depends on our position on the earth. Each territory is beautiful, has its own character, its own climate, its own distinctive terrain. But from above the earth's surface, say from the moon, all territories form the surface of a single planet. Viewed from this cosmological perspective, there is a wider beauty, an underlying unity, a unity in diversity which cannot be seen while standing on the earth's surface. Likewise, each religion has lived within its own cultural climate and has its own distinctive landscape of beliefs. The Bahá'í principle of religious unity involves seeing the underlying spiritual reality behind all religions, taking a global view of our collective religious history.

The goal of world religious unity, as a commandment which is explicitly revealed in sacred scripture, is unique to the Bahá'í Faith. Other religions have been largely confined to a specific culture or people. The diversity and beauty of each religious landscape is enhanced by taking a global view: within the greater landscape, the distinctive character of each

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 164-165

⁶ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 126

territory is brought into greater perspective. But the goal specifically undertaken by the Bahá'í Faith, is to bring about a greater unity, a planetary consciousness which encompasses all our individual religious traditions and integrates them into a wider single spiritual experience.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the Bahá'í aim of demonstrating the fundamental unity of religions applies to Hinduism. To the casual observer coming from the Semitic line of religions, there are many possible ways in which Hinduism may be misunderstood. Hinduism is often criticised for being polytheistic, anthropomorphic, blasphemous, pantheistic and idolatrous.

It is not difficult to see how modern Hinduism might give rise to such impressions. Taken at face value, Hindus believe in many gods, the three main ones being Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The gods most widely worshipped are Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Ganesha, Murthi and Krishna. Temples are dedicated to Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu and Krishna. In a single temple visit, prayers and offerings are made to different statues, each of which represents a different god. The Hindu typically starts with worshipping the most important deity at the centre, and then makes his or her way around to the lesser ones which encircle it.

Not only are there numerous gods, but they are believed to be related together by family ties. Brahma's wife is a Goddess named Saraswati, while the Goddess married to Vishnu is Lakshmi. The wife of Shiva goes under the name Parvati. Ganesha and Murthi are worshipped as sons of Parvati. For an outsider coming from the Semitic line of religions, these beliefs are not only polytheist but also overtly anthropomorphic.

There is also the issue of apparent idol worship. The god Visnu for instance, is represented by a blue statue having four arms, holding a conch, discus, mace and lotus flower. Shiva is often depicted as a many-armed dancer having dark skin and wearing a snake around his neck. The son of Parvati, Ganesha, has an elephant's head and a human body. The representation of the Hindu gods is extremely complex, and each god has many different images, but the main point here is that such images and idols are commonly used, and although the gods which they symbolise are believed to be immortal, Omnipresent, and Omniscient, in practice, they

are worshipped in the form of idols. The Hindu practice is seemingly diametrically opposed to say Judaism, whose identifying mark is its monotheistic challenge to abandon the use of idols and graven images, in its message to the people of the ancient world to worship the one invisible God.

At the other extreme, Hinduism is often described as being pantheistic. The unity of God is taken so far, that in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, a dominant influence in the modern Hindu Faith, the summit of wisdom is related to understanding that the whole universe is God. In the words of Shankara, the medieval sage who reinterpreted ancient Hindu text this way and upon whom the Advaita Vedanta school is based, "Our perception of the universe is a continuous perception of Brahman, though the ignorant man is not aware of this. Indeed, this universe is nothing but Brahman"⁷. This tradition seeks to experience unity with God. Shankara in his moment of enlightenment stated that "I have realized my identity with Brahman"⁸. This conception of God is expressed as the "non-dual" or "monist" conception of Hinduism. Viewed from the perspective of the Semitic line of religions, the Advaita Vedanta school may appear both pantheist and blasphemous.

The extreme monism of the Advaita Vedanta school is closely related to the many forms of monastic and ascetic movements of Hinduism. It was in fact Shankara who set up the first Hindu monastic orders. Many forms of yoga are designed to train a monk in the ways of the Advaita Vedanta school and lead to the mystic union of the sage with God, whereby he realises that he is identical to God.

The Advaita Vedanta has a strong influence on modern movements in India. A disciple of the well-known 19th century sage Ramakrishna, called Naren, at first expressed his scepticism concerning the non-dualist goal of being identical to God, thinking it was blasphemous, but then later came to believe it in his moment of enlightenment. He described his insight in the following way, "Wherever I looked I saw Brahman and Brahman alone. I lived in that consciousness the whole day. I returned

⁷ Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, pp 297-8

⁸ Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, pp 297-8

home, and that same experience continued. When I sat down to eat I saw that the food, plate, the server, and I myself - all were Brahman"⁹. Unlike the saints of the Semitic religions, it is quite natural for the Hindu saint to identify himself to be God.

The Advaita Vedanta is only one movement within Hinduism. There is also the school of "qualified dualism", based upon the teachings of the medieval theologian Ramanuja. Ramanuja's theology grew out of his opposition to Shankara's monism. He likened the relationship between man and God to be similar to the connection between the body and the soul. The soul, though distinct from the body, controls and guides it, lives in it, and uses it as an instrument. Similarly, Brahman is the soul of the universe, ruling over it, directing it.¹⁰ There are other strands of Hindu thought which also oppose Shankara's extreme monism, so it must be remembered that the tendency of the Hindu sage to identify himself with God is not universally accepted within Hinduism.

This paper aims to demonstrate the fundamental unity of Hinduism with the Semitic line of religions. Monotheism in the Hindu Faith is present in the form of a superior background principle, which while not rejecting polytheistic and anthropomorphic practices, transcends them. Apart from the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, use of the Bahá'í concepts of God, human nature and progressive revelation are correlated with Hindu beliefs. A major strength of Hinduism will be highlighted, namely its inherent principle of unity in diversity with respect to its religious practices and concept of God. Generally speaking, this aspect of Hinduism has made it a non-dogmatic Faith and has protected it from many of the divisive doctrinal disputes that have occurred in other religions. This principle of unity in diversity with respect to its metaphysical beliefs and religious worship is in harmony with similar principles within the Bahá'í Faith.

⁹ Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 351

¹⁰ see chapter 19 of *The Spiritual Heritage of India*

2. The Vedas

One of the most common statements made about Hinduism is that unlike other religions, it has no single founder. This statement is both true and false. It is true that Hinduism cannot be compared to Islam or Christianity, each of which has a single founder and a single holy book. It is false, because Hinduism can be compared to Judaism, where the long line of Hebrew prophets who emerge out of antiquity bear resemblance to the long line of Hindu sages, who also stretch back into the beginning of recorded history.

Although the entire corpus of Hindu literature is vast, the number of texts which all Hindus regard as sacred is much smaller. The scripture known as the Vedas are the oldest and date from around 1500 BC to 1200 BC. It is impossible to put an exact date to these texts, let alone know anything about the sages who wrote them.

The Vedas themselves consist of different parts. There is the part known as "Samhitas", which consist of mantras or hymns of praise to various nature gods. There is the part that relates to the details of sacrificial rites, duties and conduct, known as "Brahmanas". This is complemented by a part called "Aranyakas" which provide the spiritual meaning to the sacrifices and rites. But it is the last part of the Vedas, the part dealing with knowledge, the "Upanishads", that is by far the most widely read section of the Vedic lore.

The large pantheon of Vedic gods are similar to the nature gods of other ancient cultures. They are for the most part linked to the natural elements which sustain human life and are conceived of in familiar human terms. In one hymn, Indra, the rain god, has a body clad in golden armour, descends to earth where he lives and eats with his votaries, fights and overcomes his enemies, and establishes his dominion. At times, a god is understood to be both the provider of the moral order as well as the physical one. This is the case with the sky god Varuna, who was believed to be both omnipresent and a god of righteousness who had the power to forgive sins.

There are some signs of monotheism in the predominantly polytheistic Vedic period. There is a well known verse in the *Reg-Veda*, an early set of Vedic hymns, which states, "They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and it is the heavenly bird that flies. The wise speak of what is One in many ways; they call it Agni, Yama, Mitarisvan." (*Rg-Veda I: 164: 46*). This passage indicates that there was a monotheist belief in the spiritual unity underlying the diversity of the Vedic gods.

There are also other indications of an early form of monotheism. The creation hymn of the "Golden Embryo" describes a "lord of creation" who precedes all the gods and is the unitary cause of creation

"In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? He who gives life, who gives strength, whose command all the gods, his own, obey; his shadow is immortality - and death. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? He who by his greatness became the one King of the world that breathes and blinks, who rules over his two-footed and four-footed creatures - who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? O Prajapati, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the desires for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lords of riches." (*Reg-Veda 10: 121*)

Prajapati represents the unitary godhead of the Vedic period. He is conceived of both as a principle of righteousness and the Father of creation. There is also reference to the "One" of the famous Creation Hymn, which describes the primordial cause behind all phenomena, preceding "non-existence and existence".

"There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep? There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That One breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond. Darkness was hidden by darkness in the

beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that One arose through the power of heat. Desire came upon that One in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving forth above. Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows why hence it has arisen? Whence this creation has arisen - perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not - the One who looks down on it, the highest heaven, only He knows - or perhaps He does not know.”
(Reg-Veda 10:129)

The main theme that emerges from these passages is the spiritual unity underlying the apparent diversity of creation. Although the gods were believed to be immortal, they were still considered to be a part of creation. The “gods came afterwards”, whereas the One preceded everything. This unity in diversity is characteristic of Hinduism throughout its long history. The unity of the Godhead transcends the diversity of the gods, not by rejecting it, as it was done in the Semitic line of religions, but by being present at a higher level.

3. The Upanishads

The trend towards unity in the early Vedic period reaches its climax in the Upanishads. Little is known about the sages who wrote the Upanishads, and their date, as with other ancient Hindu literature is not known exactly. Scholars think that the Upanishads may have been written between 800-200 BC.

3.1 The Unknowable God

In the Upanishads, there are many points of similarity to the Semitic religious tradition. A clear point of unity between the Semitic religions and the Upanishads is the transcendent nature of God. All concepts of God, according to the Upanishads are inherently inaccurate. God is unlike anything which the mind of man can conceive. Ultimately, the most accurate description of God is no description at all. Like the *via negativa* of the medieval Semitic theologians, the Upanishads describe God as “not this, not that”, that is, in the negative form

“ The Intelligence which reveals all - by what shall it be revealed? By whom shall the knower be known? The Self is described as not this, not that. It is incomprehensible, for it cannot be comprehended; undecaying, for it never decays; unattached, for it never attaches itself; unbound, for it is never bound. By whom, O my beloved, shall the Knower be known”
(Bhadaranyaka Upanishad 4: 5: 15).

In another passage, the sages of the Upanishads clearly imply that the most common conceptions of God in their time were mistaken, that is, too literal, and that Brahman is beyond all the words, thoughts and images that the mind of man can conjure up

“What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken: Know that alone to be Brahman, Spirit; and not what people here adore. What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby the mind can think: Know that alone to be Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore. What cannot be seen with the eye, but that whereby the eye can see: Know that alone to be Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore...”
(Kena Upanishad 1: 1-3)

The parallels to the “God who hidest thyself” (Isaiah 45: 15) of Judaism, or the God “beyond all that they describe of Him” (Quran 6:100) in Islam

is obvious. God in one passage of the Upanishads, is even defined as silence

“Sir”, said a pupil to his master, “teach me the nature of Brahman”. The master did not reply. When a second and a third time he was importuned, he answered: “I teach you indeed, but you do not follow. His name is silence”¹¹.

There is a similarity here with Buddha's apparent silence on God. Rather than his silence being the negation of the concept of God, perhaps it was God's unknowability that he wanted to express.

The Upanishads transcend the polytheism of the Vedas. The Vedic gods, whenever they are mentioned in the Upanishads, are either expressions of Brahman in the created world, or they are vying with one another to know Brahman (Kena Upanishads Part3 and 4). The unknowability of God, as stated in the Upanishads, avoids the danger of anthropomorphism, and the nature of the Vedic gods appear to be comparable to the character of “angels” in the Semitic religions, rather than being the unitary Godhead which is above all likeness.

In the Bahá'í writings, the incomprehensible nature of God is mentioned on many occasions. Bahá'u'lláh explicitly states that, “Immeasurably exalted is He above the strivings of the human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery”¹². In the Seven Valleys, in connection with a human being trying to fathom the mystery of God, Bahá'u'lláh asks, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of pre-existence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun.”¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, expanding on this latter image, likens man's relationship to God in the following way, “The furthestmost limits of this bird of clay are these: he can flutter along for some short

¹¹ Quoted by Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 45,

¹² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 317-18

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p 23

distance, into the endless vast; but he can never soar upward to the Sun in the high Heavens”¹⁴.

The Bahá'í writings explain that although God is infinite and boundless, when He appears in the world of “creatures”, He takes on a form and limitation that is finite, restricted by whatever reveals Him. Like the rain, which although formless, takes on the form and shape of the container which it fills, God cannot be contained within the world of creation

“God’s grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations - dimensions, appearance, shape - according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square; in a six-sided pool it becometh a hexagon... The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form... In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendours become finite in the creatures”¹⁵

From the Bahá'í point of view, whatever the mind of man may conceive of as God, is by definition, not God.

3.2 The Immanent God

The “One” underlying creation, hinted at in the Vedic period, in the Upanishads, now unites man to the cosmos. The spirit that precedes and sustains the physical cosmos is identified to be the same spirit which dwells within the soul of man. Some of the most poetic statements about man’s unity to God in the world’s sacred scriptures are to be found in the Upanishads. The inner universe is likened to be as vast as the physical cosmos, and both these worlds find their unity in Brahman

¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 47

¹⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 161

“ In the centre of the castle of Brahman, our own body, there is a small shrine in the form of a lotus-flower, and within can be found a small space. We should find who dwells there, and we should want to know him... the little space within the heart is as great as this vast universe. The heavens and the earth are there, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars; fire and lightning and winds are there; and all that now is and all that is not: for the whole universe is in Him and He dwells within our heart”.

(Chandogya Upanishad, 8.1).

In another passage, God's presence is stated to lie at the very centre of the 'human heart', "He is immeasurable in his light and beyond all thought, and yet he shines smaller than the smallest. Far, far away is he, and yet he is very near, resting in the inmost chamber of the heart". (Mundaka Upan. 3:1:7).

There are other passages in the Upanishads that suggest that of all the signs of God's presence in the universe, the greatest is reflected in the heart of man, "There is a light that shines beyond all things on earth, beyond us all, beyond the heavens, beyond the highest, the very highest heavens. This is the Light that shines in our heart". (Chandogya 3: 13:7).

There are similar sentiments in other Faiths. The notion of man being created in God's image, a belief reiterated in the sacred scriptures of all the Semitic religions, is expressive of man having a special connection to God. In the New Testament, Christ states that, "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17: 20). Also in the same scripture, it is said that, "Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you" (I Cor. 3:16). In the Quran, there is a verse which reads, "And We know what his soul whispers within him, and we are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (1:15), or another which states, "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within the world and within themselves" (41: 53). Similarly, an old Islamic hadith states, "Dost thou reckon thyself a puny mortal form, when within thee the universe is folded?"¹⁶

¹⁶ quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, p 34

But passages of this kind from the Semitic religions are relatively few in number, and it is the transcendent conception of God which predominates. In the Upanishads however, the Immanent conception of God plays a much more central role. Take for instance the metaphor of the "City of God" which appears in the bible as well as the Upanishads. In the Old Testament, the City of God is used as a title to refer to a specific place, that is, the City of Jerusalem (Ps. 87: 3, 48:1-8, 46: 4). It is mentioned alongside God's Holy mountain, Zion (Ps 48: 1-2), and referred to as "the sacred house of the Most High (Ps. 46:4)". The 'City of God' of the Old Testament is described as a "fortress" which protects the Jewish people from the other nations, and from which God rules over the world (Ps 48:3). It is also referred to as the "Temple of God", where the Jewish people think of "God's constant love" (Ps 48: 9). In the New Testament, the City of God is also mentioned as the City of Jerusalem, and also as the prophesied New Jerusalem (Heb. 12: 22, Rev. 3:12). In the Christian tradition, the famous St Augustin of Hippo wrote a book entitled "City of God" in the early part of the 5th century AD, where he took it mainly to refer to the Christian Faith.

In Hinduism, the "City of God" is never taken to refer to a physical place, or a specific Faith. It refers to a universal inner spiritual condition, "He who knows all and sees all, and whose glory the Universe shows, dwells as the Spirit of the divine city of Brahman in the region of the human heart." In fact in the Upanishads, the City of God is used as a metaphor to convey the inherent nearness of God to man, but because men's knowledge of themselves is superficial, they fail to see that inner city, "As one not knowing that a golden treasure lies buried beneath his feet, may walk over it again and again, yet never find it, so all beings live every moment in the City of Brahman, yet never find him because of the veil of illusion by which He is concealed. The Sage resides within the lotus of the heart. Knowing this, consecrated to the Self, the sage enters daily that holy sanctuary."¹⁷

The sentiment expressed by this passage is neither dualist nor monist. It is one element of a tripartite system where God forms the link that binds man to the cosmos. The spirit of Brahman in man, Atman, is likened to

¹⁷ Quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 72

be a bridge between time and Eternity, and only the experience of spiritual enlightenment and pure actions can cross it,

“There is a bridge between time and Eternity; and this bridge is Atman, the Spirit of man. Neither day nor night cross that bridge, nor old age, nor death nor sorrow. Evil or sin cannot cross that bridge, because the world of the Spirit is pure. This is why when this bridge has been crossed, the eyes of the blind can see, the wounds of the wounded are healed, and the sick man becomes whole from his sickness. To one who goes over that bridge, the night becomes like day; because in the worlds of the Spirit there is a Light which is everlasting.”
(Chandogya Upanishad 8.4.1)

This passage has obvious parallels to the words of Isaiah, which were often repeated by Christ, where the act of having faith in God's message gives “eyes to the blind”, “ears to the deaf”, “heals the sick”, and gives “life” to the “dead” (John 12: 40). It is also reminiscent of the words of Isaiah when he states, “The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory” (Isaiah 60: 19).

In the Bahá'í writings, the Immanent tradition, of God being reflected in the heart of man is given special importance

“O My Brother! A pure heart is as a mirror; cleanse it with the burnish of love and severance from all save God, that the true sun may shine within it and the eternal morning dawn. Then wilt thou clearly see the meaning of ‘Neither doth My earth nor My heaven contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.’ And thou wilt take up thy life in thine hand, and with infinite longing cast it before the new Beloved One. Whenssoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness setteth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of

the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth..." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will. And this is that spring whereof the near ones drink, as it is said: "A fount whereof the near unto God shall drink...."¹⁸

Here, Bahá'u'lláh quotes examples of past Immanent traditions, where the human heart is believed to contain a greater measure of God's signs than 'Earth' or 'Heaven'. In the above citation it is referred to as God's home. In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh expands on the same theme in the following way

"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. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery." Manifold are the verses that have been repeatedly revealed in all the Heavenly Books and the Holy

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp 21-22

Scriptures, expressive of this most subtle and lofty theme. Even as He hath revealed: "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves." Again He saith: "And also in your own selves: will ye not, then, behold the signs of God?" And yet again He revealeth: "And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves." In this connection, He Who is the eternal King - may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him - hath spoken: "He hath known God who hath known himself." ...From that which hath been said it cometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."¹⁹

This passage bears close resemblance to many passages in the Upanishads which declare the Atman, the Self, the Spirit of Brahman, to be the Light animating the world of creation, and imply that it is reflected to a supreme degree in the heart of man.

"The light of the Atman, the Spirit, is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is keen, and is clear"
(Katha Upanishad, 3: 12)

"Always dwelling within all beings is the Atman, the Purusha, the Self, a little flame in the heart. Let one with steadiness withdraw him from the body even as an inner stem is withdrawn from its sheath. Know this pure immortal light; know in truth this pure immortal life"
(Katha Upanishad, 6: 17)

"In the supreme golden chamber is Brahman indivisible and pure. He is the radiant light of all lights and this

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 177-178

knows he who knows Brahman... From his light all these give light; and his radiance illumines all creation”.

(Mundaka Upanishad II, 2: 9-10)

“Even as the radiance of the Sun shines everywhere in space, so does the glory of God rule over his creation”

(Svetasvatara Upanishad, 5: 4)

“Even as a mirror of gold, covered by dust, when cleared well shines again in full splendour, when a man has seen the Truth of the Spirit he is one with him, the aim of his life is fulfilled and he is ever beyond sorrow. The soul of man becomes a lamp by which he finds the Truth of Brahman... This is the God whose light illumines all creation”

(Svetasvatara Upanishad, 2: 14-16)

“Brahman is seen in a pure soul as in a mirror clear and also in the Creator’s heaven as clear as light”

(Katha Upanishad, 6: 5)

“Who denies God, denies himself. Who affirms God, affirms himself”

(Taittiriya Upanishad, 2: 6)

The Hindu Atman, or Spirit of Brahman, has parallels to the Holy Spirit of Christianity. In the Bahá’í writings, an explanation of the Christian Trinity is given in terms of an analogy using the sun, its rays, and a perfect mirror. God is likened to the sun, and the rays of the sun which fall upon the earth and give it life, are likened to the Holy Spirit, and Christ is represented by the perfect mirror²⁰. As the above passages show, both in the Hindu writings and the Bahá’í writings, the presence of God in man is likened to being an inner sun, a self-luminous eternal light. These metaphors of light, are obviously in one way or another related to man being an image of God, reflecting God’s eternal light. On this point, there is evident harmony between the Upanishads and the Semitic religions.

²⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 113-5

How does God's light in man relate to the *via negativa* tradition, which states that direct knowledge of God is impossible for man? The Bahá'í writings resolve this paradox by identifying knowledge of one's inmost self to be the acme of the spiritual development possible for man, and stating that this knowledge is quite different from direct knowledge of God. From the Bahá'í point of view, the qualities of God that we are familiar with, the "All-Knowing", "the All-Powerful", the "Omniscient", etc, have actually nothing to do with the world of God. Viewed in this way, even the duty given to us to praise God, is actually for our own benefit, for our own self-discovery and self-development.

"Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can confirm of Thee, or attribute unto thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou has prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves."²¹

The Immanent tradition, although containing many statements which appear to make the inner self of man identical to God, from the Bahá'í perspective, do not actually refer to the world of God, but refer to signs of God in the world of creation. Although we speak of the attributes of God within us, they refer to the best in human nature and not anything which is inherently about God. The Bahá'í view is very clear on this point. After describing the presence of God within man and giving examples of the Immanent tradition, Bahá'u'lláh clearly distinguishes between this tradition and pantheism or anthropomorphism.

"However, let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism, nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures; nor should they lead thine Eminence to such assumptions. For God is, in His Essence, holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity

²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 4-5

been free of the attributes of human creatures, and ever will remain so. No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge of Him; every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence. Sanctified is He above the understanding of the wise; 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.... Yea, these mentionings that have been made of the grades of knowledge relate to the knowledge of the Manifestations of that Sun of Reality, which casteth Its light upon the Mirrors. And the splendor of that light is in the hearts, yet it is hidden under the veilings of sense and the conditions of this earth, even as a candle within a lantern of iron, and only when the lantern is removed doth the light of the candle shine out. In like manner, when thou strippest the wrappings of illusion from off thine heart, the lights of oneness will be made manifest.... "Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it." ²²

Here, the knowledge of God is related to His "Manifestations", or his "Mirrors" in the world of creation. These Mirrors of God's light are equated with the founders of religion, a Christ, a Moses, a Muhammad, a Krishna, a Buddha etc. It is important to note that coming to a realisation of one's identity with God is inextricably linked to becoming selfless, of stripping away the "wrappings of illusion from off thine heart". In terms of the mirror analogy given in the Bahá'í writings, polishing the mirror of our hearts results in the greater reflection of the sun's (God's) light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "Souls are like unto mirrors, and the bounty of God is like unto the sun. When the mirrors pass beyond all colouring and attain purity and polish, and are confronted with the sun, they will reflect in full perfection its light and glory" ²³

²² Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, pp 18-25

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p 367

Man's unity with God is attained by him becoming selfless, so that he can better reflect the light of the eternal Self. But from the Bahá'í point of view, as with the Semitic religious tradition, the act of being selfless does not bring man directly into contact with God, just as polishing a mirror does not mean that the mirror somehow reaches the sun: in a polished mirror we see a clearer image of the sun, but the mirror is still very different from the sun. In the same way, a selfless life becomes one with God's signs in the world of creation.

In the Upanishads, the situation is very similar to the Bahá'í position. As already quoted, the most common metaphor to express man's unity with God is the light simile, where the light of Atman is reflected in the heart of the sage: "Brahman is seen in a pure soul as in a mirror clear and also in the Creator's heaven as clear as light" (Katha Upanishad, 6: 5)

Another metaphor mentioned in the Upanishads expressing the unity of the sage to God is water dissolving into an ocean, "As rivers flowing into the ocean find their final peace and their name and form disappear, even so the wise become free from name and form and enter into the radiance of the Supreme Spirit who is greater than all greatness. In truth who knows God becomes God." (Mundaka Upanishad III, 2: 8-9). But even here, there are traces of the light image, "enter into the radiance of the Supreme Spirit". There are other passages which make it clear that even if Brahman is envisaged as something in which all things flow, yet He is "still the same", that He in some sense lies beyond them, "filled with Brahman are the things we see; filled with Brahman are the things we see not; from out of Brahman floweth all that is; from Brahman all - yet is he still the same."²⁴ This passage refutes the common misconception that Hinduism is pantheist.

In the Upanishads, the picture of God's presence in the universe is one of unity in diversity. God's relationship to the universe is likened to the sun's connection to the earth: the sun's light illumines the earth and is responsible for the development of all the diverse forms of life on it. On the other hand, the sun is independent of the earth, and is unaffected by it:

²⁴ Peace Chant in the Upanishads of the White Yajur Veda, quoted by Prabhavananda in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 43

“As fire, though one, takes new forms in all things that burn, the Spirit, though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside. As the wind, though one, takes new forms in whatever it enters, the Spirit, though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside. As the sun that beholds the world is untouched by earthly impurities, so the Spirit that is in all things is untouched by external sufferings. There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transforms his own form into many. Only the wise who see him in their souls attain the joy eternal.”

(Katha Upanishad, 5: 9-12)

Within this image of unity in diversity, there is the key to resolving the conflict between the dualist and monist schools of Hinduism, between the Shankara school of Advaita Vedanta and Ramanuja's school of qualified dualism. The monist position holds that only God is the reality, and all notions of human separateness is an illusion. This position seems to imply that the human soul has no separate self-identity. In fact the goal of human life is often expressed as eliminating self-identity, and declaring that “I am God”²⁵. But in terms of the analogy just outlined, the monist position need not be understood in this way.

The monist belief is equivalent to believing that only the sun is the independent reality, the only self-luminous reality, and all else either reflects the sun's light or in some way depends on it. Without the sun's light, all the diverse forms of life on earth would perish. To state that God is the only reality is perfectly consistent with the belief that life on earth is separate from the sun, that God is independent of His creation, the dualist position. All life on earth is sustained by a unitary source, the sun's light, but the creatures which are to be found on it are not identical to the sun. The dualist's position may be represented by the sun's independence from whatever happens on the earth. Whatever man does, it does not affect the sun, the sun is independent of the earth.

²⁵ Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 351

The monist insight is better stated in terms of being selfless, rather than being identical to God. Differences on the earthly landscape are not due to the light itself, which is one. In the Bahá'í writings, the unity in diversity theme is also expressed by the sun's relationship to the earth. The sun is the unitary source which sustains the diversity of life inhabiting the earth,

“Consider the visible sun; although it shineth with one radiance upon all things, and at the behest of the King of Manifestation bestoweth light on all creation, yet in each place it becometh manifest and sheddeth its bounty according to the potentialities of that place. For instance, in a mirror it reflecteth its own disk and shape, and this is due to the sensitivity of the mirror; in a crystal it maketh fire to appear, and in other things it showeth only the effect of its shining, but not its full disk. And yet, through that effect, by the command of the Creator, it traineth each thing according to the quality of that thing, as thou observest. In like manner, colors become visible in every object according to the nature of that object. For instance, in a yellow globe, the rays shine yellow; in a white the rays are white; and in a red, the red rays are manifest. Then these variations are from the object, not from the shining light. And if a place be shut away from the light, as by walls or a roof, it will be entirely bereft of the splendor of the light, nor will the sun shine thereon.... In sum, the differences in objects have now been made plain. Thus when the wayfarer gazeth only upon the place of appearance - that is, when he seeth only the many-colored globes - he beholdeth yellow and red and white; hence it is that conflict hath prevailed among the creatures, and a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the world. And some do gaze upon the effulgence of the light; and some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself...”²⁶

²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp 18-21

This passage makes clearer the difference between the monist and dualist approach. The monist approach focuses on the colourless formless light of the sun, to “see nothing but the sun itself.” In another passage Bahá’u’lláh cites the following Islamic Hadith, “Knowledge is a single point, but the ignorant have multiplied it”²⁷. On the other hand, the dualist position would be to emphasise the dependence of all living things on the light of the sun, which is self-luminous, intrinsically different from the objects of its illumination. All earthly objects only reflect and absorb the sun’s light, and to conceive of man being directly united with God is in the Bahá’í writings, likened to a “bird of clay” reaching the sun. Viewed in this way, both the monist and dualist approaches are equally valid and they do not contradict one another.

According to the Upanishads, gaining an insight into the unity in diversity of God’s presence in the universe is the hallmark of spiritual enlightenment, and the soul of the sage who comes to this realisation will attain inner harmony:

“Who sees the many and not the One, wanders on from death to death. Even by the mind this truth is to be learned: there are not many but only ONE. Who sees variety and not the unity wanders on from death to death. The soul dwells within us, a flame the size of a thumb. When it is known as the Lord of the past and the future, then ceases all fear: This in truth is That... As water raining on a mountain-ridge runs down the rocks on all sides, so the man who only sees variety of things runs after them on all sides. But as pure water raining on pure water becomes one and the same, so becomes, O Nachiketas, the soul of the sage who knows”

(Katha Upanishad, 4: 10-15)

Going beyond duality does not mean that man becomes directly united with God, but that man becomes selfless, and in doing so, reflects to a greater degree the eternal light of God’s spirit in the world of creation:

²⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp 24-25

“As long as there is duality, one sees the other, one hears the other, one smells the other, one speaks to the other, one thinks of the other, one knows the other; but when for the illumined soul the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken to by whom, who is there to be thought of by whom, who is there to be known by whom?”²⁸

Knowledge of the ‘Spirit’ is in effect, knowledge of the Spirit’s light in our inner world, “I know the Spirit Supreme, radiant like the sun beyond darkness” (Svetasvatara Upanishad, 3: 8).

Often, the Semitic religious traditions are type-cast as dualist, and the Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism or the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism are described as monist. In an effort to overcome this seeming contradiction between religions, Momen proposes that the philosophy of ‘Relativism’, become a ‘basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics’²⁹. He argues, quite persuasively, that the Bahá’í approach to God is not an objective one, since knowledge of God involves the process of self-discovery, God will be approached in many different ways, and there will not be one way which is superior to another. In terms of the above analogy given of the sun shining on the earthly landscape: each object reflects and absorbs the light of the sun according to its own inherent material type. Similarly, each human being approaches God differently, in a way that best releases his or her own spiritual potential. The Bahá’í approach is not dogmatic about conceptions of God, rather, it allows for a unity in diversity of approaches, since ultimately, each person’s concept of God depends on his or her own distinctive spiritual path. The process of self-discovery is irreducibly subjective and personal. This personal conception of God is also quite characteristic of the Hindu approach.

But the step of describing God in the terms of a philosophy of relativism is questionable. Philosophies based upon relativism have a lingering self-

²⁸ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 44

²⁹ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*, by Moojan Momen, Studies in the Babi and Bahá’í Religions, vol. 5, p185-217

defeat about them: if all world views are equally valid and recommendable, then there is nothing to recommend the world view which advocates relativism, as opposed say to an exclusivist world view. There is also nothing in relativism that provides for unity. Conceptually, we are unique, but there must be something universal about our spiritual intuitions and experience, otherwise, there would be no basis upon which we could share them. What is missing is that apart from being subjective, our experiences are also inter-subjective and trans-personal. For real communication to be possible, objectivity underlies subjectivity, operating as a higher principle.

Another way to express this is to speak of unity in diversity. At a superficial level there is diversity, at a deeper level, there is unity. In terms of the sun-landscape analogy, diversity of life is an integral characteristic of the landscape. Likewise, variety is intrinsic to human concepts about God. Each individual has his or her unique approach to God, which is irreducibly subjective, irreducibly linked to his or her own inner being. On the other hand, the light of the sun shines on all living beings and is responsible for their development. In the same way, individuals or religions may vary about how they describe God, but they all believe God is somehow related to their spiritual growth.

All religious people believe in a purpose to life, rather than it being meaningless. Even at a metaphysical level, there are common features to religious world-views, as opposed to say a secular one. On a spiritual level, the unity is more apparent. The spiritual light which is reflected in the lives of all holy souls, from whatever tradition they come, is remarkably similar.

4. The Epics and the Bhagavad Gita

The period of the Epics is usually placed just after the Upanishads. The two great stories which define this era, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are an integral part of popular Indian culture. Both these Epics are set in the form of legendary stories, where good eventually defeats evil. In their heroic adventures involving gods and demons, many important moral truths of Hinduism are cast in a form which is accessible

to all strata of society. Rama in the Ramayana Epic is comparable to Moses of the Old Testament. Like Moses, Rama receives the calling of a divine mission. Through divine assistance, he rescues his wife Sita from King Ravana of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), defeats Ravana and his army, and frees the people of Ceylon from Ravana's evil rule. This is similar to the story of Moses, where with the help of divine interventions, Moses defeats the evil Egyptian Pharaoh and succeeds in freeing the Jewish people. Both stories are surrounded by myths and legends, and more importantly, both stories contain moral truths about how man should follow God's commandments, and respond to God's message.

Also appearing in the Epics period is the Bhagavad-Gita, or Song of God, the most popular work in all the religious literature of India. It is often referred to as the "Holy Bible of India"³⁰. Although this great document is embedded in a book of the Mahabharata, it in many ways, stands independent from it. The Bhagavad-Gita records the words of Krishna, representing the Voice of God, who not only reiterates the truths of the Vedas and Upanishads, but introduces new perspectives into the Hindu worldview. These words are spoken to the warrior Arjuna in the midst of a battle between Arjuna and his cousins. Arjuna had lost his composure and was overwhelmed by the futility of the war, and Krishna's reassuring words describe a much more fundamental battle, the inner battle of the soul in its struggle to find peace, immortality and wisdom.

4.1 The Incarnation of God

The period of the Epics is important for many different reasons. It is in the Epics that the various incarnations of the god Vishnu are described. Many of these incarnations date from the Vedic period, while others come from the Epic period, when the god Vishnu rose into prominence. The first three incarnations, Matsya (fish), Kurma (Tortoise) and Varaha (boar) have a cosmic character, and stem from the Vedic hymns. The fourth, Narashimha (man-lion), seems to belong to a later period, when the worship of Vishnu became established. The fifth, Vamana (the dwarf), whose strides save the earth seems to come from the Vedic period. The

³⁰ see Prabhavanda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 95

sixth, seventh and eighth, Parasurama, Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, and Krishna come at a later date.

Each human incarnation of Vishnu is known as an Avatar, and has striking similarity to the incarnation of the Word of God as described in Christianity. For this reason, the stories of Vishnu as Preserver, incarnating himself whenever there is corruption in the world, is more than of passing interest for people coming from the Semitic tradition.

God in the Old Testament is spoken about indirectly. The Hebrew prophets presented themselves as inspired men who were charged with the task of delivering God's message to His people. God communicated with them in the form of visions and dreams, and they relayed His message to the Jewish people. Occasionally God's presence is described in terms of a "burning bush", or God is given the name of "I am".

But Jesus was more direct. He said, "he that have seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14: 9), or "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (John 14: 11). Moreover, to the Jews to whom Christ spoke, he identified himself to be the only path to God, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him " (John 14: 6,7). Encompassing all that there is, Christ is reported to have said, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 21: 6). Christ as the Word of God, is described as encompassing all the "letters" of creation.

For those who chose to believe in him, Christ promised them victory over death, a state of being beyond all needs and desires, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me hath everlasting life. " (John 6: 47), or, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6: 35). As the Word of God, Christ is described as immortal, beyond time, and creator of the universe, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not... But as many as received him, to them

gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1: 1-12)

Christ's words as recorded in the New Testament, are remarkably similar to the words of Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita. The unknown sages declare their faith in Atman, the eternal inner principle at work in the heart of all things, unifying all things with Brahman. It was through this unity that they pointed to a state of immortality, of the victory of life over death, of the attainment of eternal peace beyond the transient vagaries of this world. They describe the Atman indirectly, primarily in terms of a state of being which it inspires within their souls. Their declaration of enlightenment is similar to the Old Testament prophets describing their visions and dreams, of going from "darkness to light", from "death to life" (Isaiah 35: 5). There is an ambiguity, probably created through the long distance of time which separates us from the authors of the Upanishads: who or what is the Atman and how does it relate to a figure like Christ?

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna identifies himself both with Brahman and Atman, carrying all the life-giving qualities that they impart. He declares, "For those who take refuge in me and strive to be free from age and death, they know Brahman, they know Atman, and they know what Karma is" (Gita 7: 29), or "I am the soul, prince victorious, which dwells in the heart of all things" (Gita 10: 20). Just like Christ when addressing his disciples, Krishna presents himself to be the sum of the world of creation, the beginning and the end, "All these things have their life in this Life, and I am their beginning and end. In this whole universe there is nothing higher than I. All worlds have their rest in me, as many pearls upon a string" (Gita 7: 7-8), or "I am the beginning and the middle and the end of all things; their seed of eternity, their Treasure Supreme" (Gita 9: 18).

Elsewhere Krishna describes himself as the Inner Light of the souls of men, "In my mercy I dwell in their hearts and I dispel their darkness of ignorance by the light of the lamp of wisdom" (Gita 10: 11). Like Christ, Krishna promises victory over spiritual death, "For this is my word of promise, that he who loves me shall not perish" (Gita 9: 31). Krishna claimed to make the sinful sinless, "He who knows I am beginningless, unborn, the Lord of all the worlds, this mortal is from delusion, and from all evils he is free" (Gita 10: 3). In a way similar to the spiritual insight

imparted by Christ, Krishna declared that only those who have spiritual sight can see him, "See now the whole universe with all things that move and move not, and whatever thy soul may yearn to see. See it all as One in me. But thou never canst see me with these thy mortal eyes: I will give thee divine sight. Behold my wonder and glory" (Gita 11: 7-8).

Krishna mentions various spiritual qualities, such as love for one's enemies (just as Christ does), or steadfastness in "honor or disgrace", but it is the "faith and love" of the devotee which he values the most: "The man whose love is the same for his enemies or his friends, whose soul is the same in honour or disgrace, who is beyond heat or cold or pleasure or pain, who is free from the chains of attachments; ... this man is dear to me. But even dearer to me are those who have faith and love, and who have as me as their End Supreme: those who hear my words of Truth, and who come to the waters of Everlasting Life" (Gita 12: 18-20).

Krishna on several occasions makes it clear that he transcends the worship of different gods, and the love devotees have for the gods is an unconscious worship of him. According to Krishna, worship of the gods alone, is not enough to attain immortality "Even those who in faith worship other gods, because of their love they worship me, although not in the right way. For I accept their sacrifice, and I am their Lord supreme. But they know not my pure Being, and because of this they fall." (Gita 9: 23). Elsewhere, Arjuna addresses Krishna saying, "I have faith in all thy words because these words are words of truth, and neither the gods in heaven nor the demons in hell can grasp thy infinite vastness. Only the Spirit knows thy Spirit: only thou knowest thyself. Source of Being in all beings, God of gods, ruler of all" (Gita 14-15).

Although Krishna identifies himself with Brahman, he also makes a distinction between himself and the Transcendent. Krishna describes himself as the inner principle of the universe which men can approach, a spiritual condition which lives in the souls of pure human beings, which is distinct from the Transcendent. Krishna confirms the unknowable nature of God, the *via negativa* of the Semitic traditions. He presents himself as a mediator between human beings and God, "Who have all the powers of their soul in harmony, and the same loving mind for all; who find joy in the good of all beings - they reach in truth my very self. Yet greater is the

toil of those whose minds are set on the Transcendent, for the path of the Transcendent is hard for mortals to attain. But they for whom I am the End Supreme, who surrender all their works to me, and who with pure love meditate on me and adore me - these I very soon deliver from the ocean of death and life-in-death, because they have set their heart on me. Set heart on me alone and give to me thy understanding: thou shalt in truth live in me hereafter" (Gita 12: 4-5).

Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita gives greater meaning to the Atman and Brahman of the Upanishads. The Atman becomes the Spirit of God, the eternal Self which is periodically incarnate in human form. The Incarnation of God is also presented as the eternal inner Spirit, the inner Sun that shines in the hearts of the pure, "those whose unwisdom is made pure by the wisdom of their inner Spirit, their wisdom is unto them a sun and in its radiance they see the Supreme" (Gita 5: 16). The authors of the Upanishads wrote of their unity with Atman, but Krishna speaks of being the Atman itself. The notion of the Incarnation of God as presented in the Bhagavad Gita, is that it is a perfect reflection of God's presence in the world of creation, a representation of God in a form which is accessible to man. Krishna makes clear that the true Self hidden within the hearts of men, is actually the Spirit of God, which periodically incarnates itself in human form for the purpose of human salvation. This has obvious parallels to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition.

It should also be noted that the theme of 'unity in diversity' is reiterated in the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna states, "In any way that men love me in that same way they find my love: for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me" (Gita 4: 11). To see the unity underlying creation is an act of spiritual enlightenment, just as it is described in the Upanishads. Krishna states, "When a man sees that the infinity of various beings is abiding in the ONE, and is an evolution from the ONE, then he becomes one with Brahman" (Gita 13: 30).

There is much in the Bahá'í writings which correlates with the words of Krishna and the concept of the Incarnation of God as it appears in the Bhagavad Gita. In the Bahá'í writings, the Incarnation of God is referred

to as the 'Manifestation of God'³¹, or as the 'Primal Mirrors'³², or on other occasions as the 'Perfect Man'³³. It has already been mentioned in the context of the Bahá'í approach to reconciling the Immanent and Transcendent traditions. The concept of the Manifestation of God is an integral part of understanding God, and in the Bahá'í writings, it is stated that all references to God that human beings ever make, actually refer to the Manifestations of God, and not to God directly³⁴.

The Manifestation of God from the Bahá'í point of view, is likened to a perfect stainless mirror which reflects the light of God, "God is pure perfection, and creatures are but imperfections. For God to descend into the conditions of existence would be the greatest of imperfections; on the contrary, His manifestation, His appearance, His rising are like the reflection of the sun in a clear, pure, polished mirror. All the creatures are evident signs of God, like the earthly beings upon all of which the rays of the sun shine. But upon the plains, the mountains, the trees and fruits, only a portion of the light shines, through which they become visible, and are reared, and attain to the object of their existence, while the Perfect Man is in the condition of a clear mirror in which the Sun of Reality becomes visible and manifest with all its qualities and perfections"³⁵. This passage expands on the sun-landscape analogy quoted earlier. The Manifestation appears as a perfect stainless mirror on the landscape of creation, and is the Perfect Man. All human beings reflect the image of God, but the Perfect Man is as a spotless, clear mirror, which reflects the Image of God perfectly. All other mirrors appear as dim reflections of the perfect mirror. Just as all mirrors bear greater likeness to the perfect mirror when cleaned of their dross and dust, so the Manifestation of God represents the potential hidden in human nature: "the radiance of these

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp 103-104

³² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 48

³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 113-114

³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp 23-24 and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 147-8

³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 113-114

energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror" ³⁶.

True human potential, according to the Bahá'í Faith, is unlocked by the Manifestation of God. The Manifestation of God lies at the core of all things, he is hidden in the inner reality of human beings, and is identical to the Hindu concept of Atman. Bahá'u'lláh's words resemble the words of Christ or Krishna when he states, "O My servants! could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves - a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. Ye would find yourselves independent of all else but Me, and would perceive, with your inner and outer eye, and as manifest as the revelation of My effulgent Name, the seas of My loving-kindness and bounty moving within you" ³⁷. Here, the Manifestation of God is identical to the true Self, and the means by which human beings can realise their true spiritual potential. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh states that human beings can own anything they desire, but the human heart is the sole province where he must reign, "O Son of Dust, all that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart, which I have made the habitation of My beauty and glory..." ³⁸

From the Bahá'í point of view, knowledge of God is impossible. When we praise God, or refer to God, we are not strictly speaking about God at all. All references to God actually refer to two inseparable phenomena, our true selves, and the Manifestations of God. Knowledge of God is intrinsically related to the impact that the Manifestations have on our inner being, their transforming effect of releasing human potential, and their purifying effect on the mirrors of human hearts. The approach to God in Hinduism is fundamentally the same as the Bahá'í one. The Upanishads present God as the true self, while the Bhagavad Gita largely describes God in terms of an Incarnation of God (Manifestation). Both

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 65

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 326-7

³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, from the Persian, no. 27

also express the *via negativa* approach, that God is essentially unknowable.

Taking a Bahá'í view of the Hindu tradition, the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita are complementary in their approach to God and must not be separated from one another. This is particularly true for the Upanishads, for the Bhagavad is more complete than the Upanishads, in that it reiterates many truths already contained in the Upanishads, and stresses the sacred dimension to self-knowledge. But if the Upanishads are taken by themselves, it may appear that God is identical to one's true self and that any human being can reach God by striving for inner unity and self-knowledge. This would contradict God's unknowable nature. Due to the long passage of time which separates us and the authors of the Upanishads, it is difficult for us to know the root of their inspiration. Their enlightenment may well have been rooted in previous Incarnations of Vishnu, for which historical records have been lost. The Hindu concept of God is better understood by taking into account both the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita together, and if this is done, its fundamental agreement with the Bahá'í approach to God and the God of the Semitic line of religions becomes clearer.

4.2 Progressive Revelation

There is another aspect of the Hindu Avatar which finds unity with the Semitic line of religions and the Bahá'í Faith. This is in the concept of the Incarnation of Vishnu being a periodic event through human history. Krishna states, "When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth. For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfilment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass. He who knows my birth as God and who knows my sacrifice, when he leaves his mortal body, goes no more from death to death, for he in truth comes to me." (Gita 4: 7-9).

This passage has many similarities to the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation and to the continuous line of revelation in the Semitic revelation. In the Quran it is written, "To every people was sent an

Apostle; when their Apostle comes before them, that matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged" (Quran 10: 47). Also in the New Testament it is written, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Hebrews 1: 1-2).

In the Bahá'í writings it is stated, "In the Kingdoms of earth and heaven there must needs be manifested a Being, an Essence Who shall act as a Manifestation and Vehicle for the transmission of the grace of the Divinity Itself, the Sovereign Lord of all. Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the Prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men, and have evinced such power as is born of God and such might as only the Eternal can reveal"³⁹.

The Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation generalises the concept of the Avatar to be a phenomenon which has occurred within every major spiritual tradition of the world. In the Semitic line of religions, Avatars are referred to as prophets, but from the Bahá'í perspective, the terms Avatar or Prophet refer to the same phenomenon.

Within the spiritual heritage of India, it is generally agreed amongst Hindus that there have been nine Avatars so far. The first eight have already been mentioned, Rama being the seventh and Krishna being the eighth. Many Hindus have come to accept Buddha as the ninth Avatar. The 9th century AD Hindu revival due to Shankara, from which the Advaita Vedanta school arose, was very much linked to the influence of Buddhism on Hinduism. Many of the characteristic Vedanta themes, such as going beyond dualism to monism, although implicitly there in Hindu scriptures, were given a new lease of life through the teachings of the Buddha. The tenth Avatar, the Kalki Avatar, is usually cited by Hindus to be the future Avatar to come. Hindus should therefore be open to investigating Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the fulfilment of all the world's

³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 67

spiritual traditions, which in Hinduism, translates to being the Kalki Avatar⁴⁰.

Hinduism has also been influenced by the Semitic religions. From the 15th to 17th centuries AD, the impact of Islam in northern India inspired the rise of Sikhism. More recently, the 19th century Ramakrishna Mission derived much of its impetus from the interaction of the Hindu tradition with Christianity.

5. Unity in Diversity

As with the Semitic religions, Hinduism employs many symbols to convey its spiritual message. The citations from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita already quoted show that the Hindu concept of God's unknowable nature is in complete agreement with the descriptions of God in the Semitic line of religions. No symbol can adequately capture the nature of God, no form can represent the formless. The best approach to understanding God is to state what God is not, 'Not this, Not that' (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4: 5: 15) - the *via negativa*. The symbols that describe God, are actually descriptions of human spirituality, a reflection of ourselves, and do not directly relate to God. Because the concept of God is irreducibly subjective, that is, it involves us discovering our true selves, unlocking our true potential, there will be as many descriptions of God as there are people - and they are all equally wrong, and equally correct. This principle is well recognised within the spiritual tradition of India⁴¹.

There will also inevitably be a cultural dimension to this kind of metaphysical relativism. In general, God is described in the Semitic line of religions with many metaphors which derive from the act of speaking, such as the "breath of the Holy Spirit", or the "Word of God", "Alpha and Omega of creation" and so on. In the stories of the Old Testament, God speaks to his people, and it is His Voice, His holy command that is His identifying mark. These portrayals of God are of course, inevitably

⁴⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p 95

⁴¹ Prabhananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, pp 34-5

anthropomorphic, giving a human form to the formless. God is described by many attributes, such as wisdom, knowledge, justice and is given many titles like the Creator, Fashioner, or Provider. In Islam, these attributes of God are called Names of God (Quran 20: 8). The Names of God are also frequently mentioned in the Bahá'í writings.

Similar representations of God also exist within Hinduism. The god Ganesha symbolises the holy word OM. In general, different deities personify different names and attributes of God. One of the designations of Shiva is that of Destroyer, and together with his consort Kali, they make up something comparable to the Wrath of God in the Old Testament. Another personification of Shiva's consort is Shakti, whose name literally means "energy", and her action in the world is something akin to how the "Breath" of the Christian "Holy Spirit" animates and sustains the world. The god Brahman has the function of being Creator, while his consort Saraswati symbolises Knowledge. Vishnu most popularly portrays God as the Preserver, while his consort Lakshmi, symbolises Wealth. The gods and goddesses symbolise the names and attributes of the Brahman of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. From this perspective, the description of a god having a consort or a family, is only a figurative expression, and should not be taken literally.

There may be some Hindus who emphasise the literal meaning of the symbols, and who conceive of the many gods of Hinduism as having a reality of their own. But by the same token, many religious people of the Semitic religious tradition are also literal about their symbols of God. This does not invalidate the spiritual meaning behind the symbol.

There is also another dimension to the symbols of God in Hinduism. In general, the Hindu representation of God's attributes is more visual than in the Semitic line of religions. The dark skin of Shiva, the snake around his neck, the tiger skin as his cape, symbolise his power of destruction. His third eye denotes inner vision. Often Shiva is depicted as a dancer, where one of his four hands beats a drum, sounding out the rhythm of creation. The dark blue colour of Vishnu symbolises infinite space. He stands in an upright pose, in a pillar-like stance, depicting his role of sustainer of the worlds. In his four hands, the conch shell stands for Vishnu as the origin of the universe, the discus represents the cosmic

mind, the mace symbolises renovation, and the lotus denotes purity in the midst of evil. The bended trunk of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, symbolises his ability to remove obstacles. He is worshipped at the beginning of any endeavour. These visual forms have many levels of different meanings and vary from region to region, and are spiritual symbols to the enlightened Hindu. They represent the formless Brahman in forms which the human mind can conceive, and are rather like the names and attributes of the unitary invisible Godhead of the Semitic religions.

The personal character of Hindu religious symbols means that in comparison to the Semitic religions, it is less theological, less canonical about its beliefs. Hindus are much more autonomous in their religious practice, much more concerned about verifying spiritual truths through their own personal experience, than formulating a common creed or engaging in theology. That this freedom is generally shared by most Hindus is reflected in the Doctrine of Chosen Deity⁴², the widely practised principle that each Hindu is free to worship whichever god he or she wishes. In fact, it is not uncommon for Hindus to include Muslim and Christian prayers in their liturgy.

The call for unity in Hinduism is an ancient one, and has been periodically reiterated throughout its long History. In the Rig Veda, it is said that the "wise speak of what is ONE in many ways" (Rig Veda I: 164: 46), The Katha Upanishads state that, "there are not many but only ONE. Who sees variety and not unity wanders from death to death" (Katha Upanishad Part 4: 10). In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna declares that, "In any way that men love me in that same way they find my love: for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me" (Gita 4: 11). The search for unity is embedded deep into the psyche of Hinduism.

It is not surprising that modern Hindu movements have made unity their chief goal. Take for instance, the Ramakrishna movement, founded on the teachings of the 19th century sage Ramakrishna. The core teaching of the Ramakrishna movement is that all religions are one. In the words of Ramakrishna, "So many religions, so many paths to reach the same

⁴² see J.P.Suda, *Religions in India, a Study in their Essential Unity*, p 50

goal... I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths" ⁴³. On another occasion Ramakrishna likens the different religions in the world to the different names that each culture gives to water, although the names sound different, they refer to the same liquid, "The tank has several *ghats*. At one Hindus draw water and call it *jal*, at another Mohammedans draw water and call it *páni*; at a third Christians draw the same liquid and call it *watér*. The substance is one though the name differs, and everyone is seeking the same thing. Every religion of the world is one such *ghat*. Go with a sincere and earnest heart by any of these *ghats* and you will reach the water of eternal bliss. But do not say that your religion is better than that of another" ⁴⁴.

These words are very similar to the message of religious unity as expressed in the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá for instance, describes religious unity in the following way, "Light is good in whatsoever lamp it is burning! A rose is beautiful in whatsoever garden it may bloom! A star has the same radiance if it shines from the East or from the West. Be free from prejudice, so you will love the Sun of Truth from whatsoever point in the horizon it may arise! You will realize that if the Divine light of truth shone in Jesus Christ it also shone in Moses and in Buddha. The earnest seeker will arrive at this truth. This is what is meant by the Search after Truth" ⁴⁵.

Ramakrishna's teachings were developed and spread by his disciple Vivekananda. Just before the turn of this century, Vivekananda toured the West, and is responsible for greatly increasing knowledge about Hinduism there. In most of his Western talks, Vivekananda promoted the goal of religious unity and the principle of unity in diversity. In his address at the World's Parliament of Religions congress, in Chicago on 11th September 1893, Vivekananda stated that, "Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognised it" ⁴⁶. He went on to describe religious unity by

⁴³ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 341

⁴⁴ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 341

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 137

⁴⁶ Vivekananda, *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume 1, p 15

paraphrasing the words of Krishna, "It is the same light coming through different colours. And these little variations are necessary for the purposes of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu in His incarnation as Krishna, "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know that I am there"...."⁴⁷. Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita states, "In the whole vast universe there is nothing higher than I. All the worlds have their rest in me, as many pearls upon a string" (Gita 7:7). Clearly Vivekananda draws the natural conclusion implied in Krishna's words that the thread which unites together all things in the universe, must also bind together different religious revelations.

The title of Vivekananda's talk delivered in London on 3rd November 1896 was 'Unity in Diversity'⁴⁸. This is significant from the Bahá'í perspective, since Shoghi Effendi in 1931 wrote that the "watchword" of the Bahá'í Faith was "unity in diversity"⁴⁹. It would appear that 'unity in diversity' is the touchstone principle of both the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism.

Another interesting feature of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda school of Hinduism is that it sees revelation as a never-ending continuous process, with no beginning, without end. This gives rise to an openness towards all spiritual traditions, which today, is rarely associated with religion. Vivekananda states that, "I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do these but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? Or is it still a

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p 16

⁴⁸ Vivekananda, *Complete works of Vivekananda*, volume II, pp 175-188

⁴⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 42

continuous revelation, going on? It is a marvellous book – these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so-many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future”⁵⁰. These words echo the following words of Bahá'u'lláh, “This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future”⁵¹, or “consort with all religions with amity and concord”⁵². Both the Bahá'í Faith and Hinduism understand revelation to be a universal dynamic phenomenon, which means that they share a spirit of openness towards accepting other spiritual traditions.

Hinduism is increasingly being offered as a possible model for religious unity by both Hindus and non-Hindus⁵³. The relatively peaceful coexistence over many centuries amongst different religious communities on the Indian subcontinent is often traced to the Hindu concept of unity in diversity. This is in contrast to many other places in the world, where fanaticism and dogmatism are fuelled by religious ideologies based upon superiority or exclusion. At the end of his book on the Spiritual Heritage of India, the writer Swami Prabhananda concludes his survey of Indian spiritual history by suggesting that Hinduism may well play a future role in bringing together the world's spiritual traditions:

“It is perhaps natural in closing this book to emphasize strongly the age-old effort of India to reconcile differing faiths. For it is probably by continuing this effort on an international scale that she is doing most to advance the spiritual welfare of mankind. To bring together against rampant evil the great religions of the world is no doubt a gigantic task, but it is one for which India has the

⁵⁰ Vivekananda, *Complete works of Vivekananda*, volume II, p 372

⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p136

⁵² Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, p72

⁵³ see *Modern Indian responses to religious pluralism*, edited by Harold G. Coward

special qualification that she strives for unity, not by calling for a common doctrine, but only pointing to a common goal, and by exhorting men to its attainment. The path, she assures us, matters little; it is the goal that is supreme. And what is the goal? It is only - once again - to realize God”⁵⁴

Since the unity of the world’s religious traditions is precisely one of the central goals of the Bahá’í Faith, the Hindu experience and its present day concerns is more than of passing interest to Bahá’ís. The Hindu sacred scriptures do not however, make many references to religious traditions outside the Indian subcontinent. By making use of the Bahá’í writings, the Hindu search for unity would be significantly widened. On the other hand, for Bahá’ís, in their effort at “restating the fundamentals” of each Faith, to “reconcile their aims”, to “reinvigorate their life”, to “demonstrate their oneness”, to “restore the pristine purity of their teachings” and to “assist in the realization of their highest aspirations”⁵⁵, they will find a kindred spirit within Hinduism.

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⁵⁴ quoted by Prabhavanda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p 356

⁵⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp 114-116

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