

# The Possibilities of Existential Theism for Bahá'í Theology

by Jack McLean

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## Abstract

*In this paper it is argued that the perspective of existential theology has certain benefits for current Bahá'í studies of religion. Although existentialism is a modern intellectual and artistic movement, the roots of the existential outlook reach back to antiquity. Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Islamic and Christian thought, as well as certain perspectives of classical and modern philosophy, all reflect existential concerns. The writings of existentialist thinkers continue to be relevant to a spiritual understanding of our living-in-the-world. This paper makes a correlation between insights of existential theology and Bahá'í perspectives of scholarship, spiritual transformation and sacred history.*

## Introduction

Although rooted in antiquity, modern existentialism is an intellectual movement that first took shape in the nineteenth century and came to prominence in the post world war two period. John Macquarrie has detailed the broad-spectrum influence of existentialism, not only on theology, philosophy and literature, but also on a variety of areas in the arts, education and culture.<sup>2</sup> As a much compressed background to this paper, it might be useful to distinguish at the outset four general modes within existentialism. These modes have all borrowed from, reacted to, and influenced one another, so the divisions are in no way iron clad. Even theists and atheists share common concerns in existentialism, although the treatment, as we might expect, is different.(1) First, there is the theistic existentialism founded by Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who is the ancestral figure for post world war two existentialists, whether believing or atheistic.<sup>3</sup> Pre-dating Kierkegaard, one can recognize existential moods in the Book of Job, the Psalmist, Ecclesiastes, in Augustine and Pascal. Indeed, existential theism finds its most ancient roots in the human condition itself, as reflected in the many Greek myths of estrangement and loss, and the Genesis account of the exile of humanity's original parents from Eden with its everafter estrangement from self. (2) Second, there are the philosophical existentialists, both theistic and non-theistic such as Sartre,

<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper was incorrectly cited in the Table of Contents as "Promises to Keep: Thoughts on an Emerging Bahá'í Theology."

2. See John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (London, England:Penguin Books, 1972). For a more specifically theological focus of existentialism see, for example, John Macquarrie's *An Existentialist Theology* (1955) and *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (1960), Fritz Buri's *Theology of Existence* (trans. 1965), Karl Jaspers in *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (trans. 1967), and Jaspers' *Nietzsche and Christianity* (trans. 1961), C. Michalson, ed. *Christianity and the Existentialists* (1956). See also references below.

3. Although it was Kierkegaard who coined the term "existentialist", Walter Kaufmann sees *Dostoevsky's Notes From Underground* (1864) as the overture to the voice of strident individuality that was to be heard later in Kierkegaard. See Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York, N.Y.: A Meridian Book, 1975) pp. 12, 14-15.

Jaspers and Heidegger who are considered to be the founders of post world war two existential philosophy.<sup>4</sup> (3) Third, there is the literary existentialism of writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus and Sartre, a literature that tends, however, to be dark and pessimistic about human motives and the ability of the individual to overcome psychological conflict and live happily. Sartre, for example, completely explodes the concept of any meaningful existence, concluding with his well-known dictum that life is *absurde*.<sup>5</sup> This literature is to be contrasted with the more positive implications for interpersonal relations of Heidegger's *Besorgen/Fürsorge*<sup>6</sup> (concern/solicitude) and Buber's "I-Thou"<sup>7</sup> or Gabriel Marcel's "métaphysique de l'espérance" (metaphysic of hope)<sup>8</sup>. (4) Fourth, there is the school of existential psychiatry and psychology, founded by the Swiss psychiatrists Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) and Medard Boss (1903-) which has a strong philosophical flavour and which has markedly influenced such writers as Rollo May, Eric Fromm, and Viktor Frankl. Even though American experimental psychology worked hard to divest itself of the influence of the philosophical overtones of European existentialist thought, the existentialist outlook has found a responsive chord in English-speaking readers of psychology, particularly in North America.<sup>9</sup>

### Kierkegaard and the Relevance of Existential Theology for Bahá'í Studies of Religion

In his polemic against Hegelian philosophers during the last century,<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard made a point that is relevant to the present state of Bahá'í studies. He argued that the speculative philosophers with their categories, finality, systematisation and historicisation of religious phenomena had failed to deal with the most crucial issues in Christianity: the meaning of suffering, anxiety and despair, peace of mind, faith and doubt, hope, happiness and spiritual rebirth. We may also well ask as Kierkegaard did — where did such a vital reality as divine love fit into the philosophers' schemes? Although Kierkegaard created his own highly individualistic metaphysical

4. John Macquarrie describes Jaspers and Heidegger as standing "somewhere between the confessed theists and the confessed atheists" (*Existentialism* p. 252).

5. Sartre writes in *Le Suicide* "La vie est absurde". [p...] Life's absurdity was made more pointedly by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942) (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), but as John Passmore points out, at least Camus did not attempt to ontologize absurdity. "But Camus is not an existentialist; he does not believe that absurdity can be ontologized" (John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, England:Penguin Books, 1968) p. 491. Camus may not be an existentialist in the strict philosophical sense, but his writings are nonetheless definitely existential in perspective — in Camus' case an atheistic humanism.

6. See Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E.S. Robinson. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) German original *Sein und Zeit*, 1927. Like several existential thinkers Heidegger was preoccupied with the meaning of anxiety. As for Jaspers and Marcel, Heidegger rejected the existentialist label when applied to him. But this anti-labelling tendency is itself typical of existential thinkers who were strongly individualistic and resisted categorisation.

7. See below.

8. See below.

9. Among their better known works are Ludwig Binswanger's *Being-in-the-World* (1963) and Medard Boss's *Psychoanalysis and Dasein Analysis* (1963). For an informative shorter introduction to existential psychology, see Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey "Existential Psychology" in *Theories of Personality* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1957) pp. 552-581.

10. Hegel's absolute idealism was the reigning philosophy in the Denmark of Kierkegaard's day. At the basis of Kierkegaard's disagreement with Hegel was Kierkegaard's assertion that attaining happiness, or in philosophical terms the highest good, could not be secured through philosophizing alone. For Kierkegaard, ideas alone were a paltry means in securing eternal happiness. See Alistair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) pp. 19-20. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard employed dialectic, but unlike Hegel's logical dialectic working within a closed system, Kierkegaard's dialectic expounded upon the solitary individual working within the three spheres of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Kierkegaard attacked not only Hegelian idealism, but Kantian moral idealism as well. He felt that all forms of rational theology were inadequate for a true understanding of the human condition.

world-view which was in part indebted to the speculative idealism which he so strongly criticised, he was surely correct in his observation that the philosophical systems of his day for the most part bracketed the most real and urgent of human questions.

In a passage loaded with the irony interspersed throughout his writings, Kierkegaard levelled the criticism against philosophy that speculation amounted to a desertion of existence. Philosophy made one immortal indeed, Kierkegaard wrote, but in the same way that the doctor with his medicine expels the fever but kills the patient. His statement is a cogent example of what he viewed as one of the most serious lacunae of philosophy vis-à-vis the concrete problems of human existence. It is difficult to deny Kierkegaard's affirmation that the individual is "infinitely interested in existing", whereas speculative philosophy, he is telling us, does not address the real questions of human existence:

Now if we assume that abstract thought is the highest manifestation of human activity, it follows that philosophy and philosophers proudly desert existence, leaving the rest of us to face the worst....[Philosophy] is disinterested; but the difficulty inherent in existence constitutes the interest of the existing individual, who is infinitely interested in existing. Abstract thought thus helps with respect to my immortality by first annihilating me as a particular existing individual and then making me immortal, about as when the doctor Holbert killed the patient with his medicine — -but also expelled the fever.<sup>11</sup>

It was not speculation that interested the religious subject, Kierkegaard maintained, but rather eternal happiness:

The subject is in passion infinitely interested in his eternal happiness, and is now supposed to receive assistance from speculation, i.e., by himself philosophizing. But in order to philosophize he must proceed in precisely the opposite direction, giving himself up and losing himself in objectivity, thus vanishing from himself.<sup>12</sup>

What Kierkegaard criticises here is the annihilation of the religious subject in the objective question. His statement suggests rather the discovery of spiritual selfhood through experience and discourse. While the western Bahá'í community still awaits the emergence of grand systematising philosophers or theologians,<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard's point is pertinent to the current preoccupations of Bahá'í scholars of religion working in Bahá'í history, exegesis and theology, the three main sub-disciplines thus far defining Bahá'í studies of religion. While these three disciplines have opened up instructive avenues in Bahá'í studies, they remain nonetheless bound by content orientation rather than process. By content orientation I mean that the Bahá'í Faith is basically apprehended by the scholar as an independent collection of data to be researched and explicated in an original manner. While content orientation is basic to scholarship and valid in its own right, its virtue masks

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11. Kierkegaard, uncited source quoted by John Updike in "Søren Kierkegaard" in *Atlantic Brief Lives. A Biographical Companion to the Arts*, ed. Louis Kronenberger, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1965, p. 430.

12. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David L. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941) p. 49.

13. One reads in the literature produced by Bahá'í scholars the occasional urging for the Bahá'í systematic theologian to emerge. While such a grand systematisation of Bahá'í theology would be a major *tour de force*, one has to keep in mind that systematic theology is predicated on a certain view of finality working within a closed system. Existence, however, unfolds precisely in the opposite manner — through the revelation of new truths that are constantly emerging. See Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 107. The universal scope of Bahá'í sacred scripture, in any case, would seem to defy any one theological system to do justice to the diversity of themes and concepts treated in the Bahá'í writings. It is rather more likely that a number of differing theological and metaphysical thought systems will emerge in time and coexist within the Bahá'í writings.

nonetheless a defect which weakens its effectiveness for the personal dimensions of religious studies. Such an approach, if pursued exclusively, neglects *'ilm-i vújúd'*<sup>14</sup> (the knowledge of being/existence) which has profound implications for a living philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*) or *le vécu*, the lived experience of the individual.

I argue that Bahá'í theology should retain as one of its major tasks the elucidation of spiritual *anthros*, and the provision of meaning or insight into the "real life" of the individual. If Bahá'í theology does not inspire the believer, or shed light on personal dilemmas, raise consciousness or provide insights into spiritual transformation, then it risks becoming identified with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's pointed critique of religion as "the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine" ...<sup>15</sup> and becoming mired in what he also referred to as "...Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone."<sup>16</sup> The existential outlook I advocate here reflects, moreover, an indirect pastoral concern, but one that would be addressed through the discourse of philosophical theology rather than homily or counselling. Such an approach with its potential diversity of worthwhile themes relating to concrete life issues would result in an aspiring synthesis of the real with the ideal.

### The Scholar as Persona

Scholars generally speak through an objective-detached mode of discourse. Yet there is still much room for the scholar to speak through the subjective-engaged mode as a *persona* (*Lat.=mask; per=through + sonus=sound*). The *persona* reflects the scholar's vision of the truth expressed in a characteristic voice of the experiencing subject who is as much advocate of personal vision as detached analyst. The voice in the subjective-engaged mode would reflect the experiences and perceptions of the real<sup>17</sup> self. This move toward authenticity in scholarship would offer the reader the scholar/writer's experience of divine subjectivity in a spirit of intersubjective communion.

In the objective-detached content approach that has thus far characterised Bahá'í studies, however, the scholar is not transparent to the work, but has subjugated the self to the objective question under study. The individual is not present, so to speak. It is the question which predominates and the elucidation of the question is the main goal. When writing in the *persona* of spiritual self, however, one becomes a hermeneute in an interaction of both text and experience. In this mode of writing, the author becomes more transparent to the reader and less subjugated to the dialectics of the objective idea. This form of exposition holds the potential for liberating the scholar/writer to move further along the path of creativity by placing the framework of interpretation within an interaction of sacred scripture and the scholar's individual spiritual perception. Put differently, the subjective-engaged mode allows the scholar to become the creator of

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14. For the expression *'ilm-i vújúd'* see, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of "The Knowledge of the Divine Manifestations" in *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, Illinois.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 157. Juan Ricardo Cole has alluded to a resemblance between 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *'ilm-i vújúd'* with that of Plotinus' primal intellection in the Enneads, V. 3,2 and a similar notion in Avicenna, *De Anima*, 248-49. See Juan Ricardo Cole's monograph, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings." (Ottawa:Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982) n. 149, p. 35.

15. Mabel Hyde Paine, comp. *The Divine Art of Living* (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1944), p. 25.

16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Reality of Man* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956) p. 9. The complete quotation is: "Thoughts may be divided into two classes: — Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone. Thought that expresses itself in action." (9) Existential theological discourse is of course vehicled by words but carries the potential for a more direct connection with the individual's life.

17. By the "real self" I mean both the experiences that the self has gleaned in the world and reflections on objective questions in light of that experience, rather than the mere analysis of abstract, objective questions in which the subject is neither visible nor present.

a wider, more personal world of discourse.<sup>18</sup>

In this same vein, Rudolf Bultmann writes that it is a false notion to suppose that one has to suppress subjectivity and individuality in order to attain "objective knowledge":

Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity, extinguish his individuality, if he is to attain objective knowledge. That requirement makes good sense only in so far as it is taken to mean that the interpreter has to silence his personal wishes with regard to the outcome of the interpretation....For the rest, unfortunately, the requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding. Such understanding presupposes precisely the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible development of his individuality.<sup>19</sup>

The question of commitment also crops up in the discussion of scholar as *persona*. The style of academic scholarship today requires an emotional distance of the self vis-à-vis the objective question. Indeed, in hard-edged scholarship nuances of emotion are usually looked upon as being suspect, having no place in the cognitive milieu. Convention requires moreover that unless one is writing apologetics, the writer is not to openly avow commitment to the tradition in question — if one is committed to it — although this commitment may sometimes be presumed. And yet religion is all about a sense of commitment. One may consequently ask why, without it becoming shouting or the preaching of one who "...clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause."<sup>20</sup> deprecated by Bahá'u'lláh, such a sense of commitment would *de facto* be excluded. Existential theology makes it clear, however, that the scholar/writer is sitting *inside* the theological circle, and is profoundly engaged not only in reflection to a tradition to which he or she is committed, but in life itself.

When one raises the question of a scholar's commitment, however, one usually has to raise the flag of caution against dogmatism or preaching because there is always the fear, and the danger, of the one slipping into the other. Karl Jaspers put it well, however, when he said: "Man can seek the path of his truth in unfanatical absoluteness, in a decisiveness which remains open."<sup>21</sup> In reality, this advocacy of the scholar as *persona*, as a subjective interpreter of spiritual experience, flows naturally from a commitment to the acquisition of personal knowledge which is an aspiration to seek and find wisdom.

### A Bahá'í Perspective of Some Defining Points of Existential Theism

Some defining points of existential theism to be highlighted below in a Bahá'í perspective are:<sup>22</sup> (1) The engaged subject and spiritual passion in the search for truth (2) Living-in-the-world

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18. I do not advocate that the experiences of the individual alone become the sole locus of reflection. I mean rather that the creation of this discourse be carried out in light of the meaning of Bahá'í scripture, sacred history and subjective experience as it has contributed to the process of spiritual transformation or philosophical reflection.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 47 (1950), p. 64 quoted by Bernard J.F. Lonergan in *Method in Theology* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1990) p. 158.

20. The complete sentence reads: "In this Day, We can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behavior of the avowed believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause." Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 343.

21. From Jasper's essay "On My Philosophy" quoted in Kaufmann p. 232.

22. I am following below some main themes raised by several existential theologians, but I have made a conscious attempt to perceive their concerns through the filter of a Bahá'í worldview. A more specifically Bahá'í treatment of such concerns can be found below in "Existential Meaning in Bahá'í Sacred History and Writings". Each of the six points above deserves a fuller treatment than

(3) Overcoming alienation from God (4) The personal mode in divine subjectivity (5) The existential and the epiphanic moments (6) The realism of confronting self. These points will be considered in global fashion.

In the search for truth, which `Abdu'l-Bahá has called "the first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh"<sup>23</sup> and Shoghi Effendi a "primary duty",<sup>24</sup> there is always a seeking subject. This seeking subject gives meaning to the spiritual world order, for without the truth-seeker there would be no application of spiritual principles or values in the world. Although truth may exist in other cosmological realms beyond our ken, as for the dimensions in which "we live, and move, and have our being;...",<sup>25</sup> truth would not exist without its apprehension by the rational soul. It is only the rational soul that is capable of apprehending the truth in its depths, in its profoundest meaning. Truth, then, cannot be confined merely to an objective body of data waiting to be discovered outside the seeker, for he or she is subjectively engaged *in* the truth-seeking process. Bearing this in mind, purely objective theological knowledge or judgement becomes a quasi-impossibility. The search for truth is rather a movement toward the depths of the center of being, what St. Paul called "the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians:10). In one sense, the seeker **is** the truth that is being sought. Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out that:

The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.<sup>26</sup>

This statement clearly points to the capacity of the self to understand both itself and the world once it has experienced transcendence. World understanding becomes possible with self-understanding. In this sense the self becomes the vehicle or framework of interpretation for understanding the world. Self-understanding and world-understanding are inextricably linked. Put differently, the catalyst of divine revelation (Holy Word/Holy Spirit) will precipitate the perception of the truth that lies both within the seeker's own soul and the world. The seeker's truth does not lie consequently in a projected intellectual space outside the individual as a body of correct, objective and static knowledge. Rather, the truth is revealed to the soul in ongoing fashion in a process of meaningful moments of search and discovery. According to this view, all knowledge is in some

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the limitations of space allow.

23. `Abdu'l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Illinois:Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 62. It is perhaps the deceptive simplicity of this teaching that has caused it to suffer a certain neglect in comparison with the scholarly treatment of other Bahá'í teachings. For a further discussion on the search for truth see "The Starting Point: The Search for Truth" in J.A. McLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality. Reflections on the Meaning of Spiritual Life and Transformation in Light of the Bahá'í Faith*, pp. 1-40 (Oxford:George Ronald, 1994). See also Gary L. Matthews instructive article "The Searching Eye" ("Bahá'í News", September, 1989, pp. 2-9). In his talks in North America, `Abdu'l-Bahá consistently places the search for truth first in his presentations of Bahá'í teachings. See, for example, his talks in Washington, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Boston, Montreal, Sacramento, and on two occasions in New York, and also in his long exposé of Bahá'í teachings in Paris. See `Abdu'l-Bahá's *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* and *Paris Talks*.

24. The complete quotation is: "It [the Bahá'í Faith] moreover, enjoins upon *its followers* the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth." This quotation is particularly noteworthy because of the italicized words. The search for truth is not just for those who are seeking truth in their pre-Bahá'í stage. The duty of the search continues in the post-Bahá'í stage. "A World Religion. The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh", a summary statement of the origin, teachings and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith prepared in 1947 by Shoghi Effendi for the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. (Wilmette, Illinois:Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950), p. 9 (my emphasis).

25. This phrase is from Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill to the men of Athens. Luke reports Paul as saying in The Acts of the Apostles: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring." (17:28)

26. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 14. London: Nisbet and Company Ltd., 1941.

sense self-knowledge. For Kierkegaard, moreover, it is only to the extent that one's truth is internalised is one happy or unhappy: "The unhappy person is one who has an idea, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, the essence of his being, in some manner outside himself."<sup>27</sup>

The process of truth-seeking is nourished, moreover, by a spiritual attitude on the seeker's part of sincerity, active zeal or passion, one that leaves no stone unturned. Kierkegaard made passion a positive element in the quest for truth, for it alone could confer certainty: "The conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones", he said in a memorable phrase, and another statement could well apply to the state of truth-seeking today: "What our age lacks is not reflection but passion".<sup>28</sup> In the Bahá'í Faith, however, truth-seeking is God-seeking. In his epistemology of Divine Truth, Bahá'u'lláh makes spiritual passion the *sine qua non* in the search for God. This element of spiritual passion is not an irrational enemy of logic, as is sometimes supposed, but a co-rational, extra-rational or super-rational dynamic of operational reality:

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubt and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.<sup>29</sup>

In a talk on "Bahá'í Scholarship-Definitions and Perspectives", Moojan Momen refers to the key role played by passion in Bahá'í epistemology: "I have never known an expert who was an impartial observer; the very fact that they [sic] are expert means that they have a passion about the subject. So it is illogical to consider them as impartial and dispassionate".<sup>30</sup> Momen thus links passion to expertise. It would be illogical, according to this line of reasoning, not to have passion.

Nietzsche in *The Gay Science (Die Froliche Wissenschaft)* in his typically provocative and intense style, speaks of an age to come in which what he calls "preparatory men" will "carry heroism into the pursuit of knowledge"...<sup>31</sup> Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche had understood that knowledge had to be pursued with an almost violent intensity:

men characterised by cheerfulness, patience, unpretentiousness, and contempt for all great vanities... Soon the age will be past when you could be satisfied to live like shy deer, hidden in the woods! At long last the pursuit of knowledge will reach out for its due: it will want to *rule* and *own*, and you with it!... For, believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously!* Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves!

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27. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 1, p. 220.

28. Kierkegaard quoted in Kaufmann p. 18. I do not think that Kierkegaard meant to exclude reason entirely in his promotion of passion in the search for truth. The metaphysical dialectic that he created in reaction to the systematisers of his day is of course rational insofar as it can be subjected to analysis. Kierkegaard's sometimes immoderate railings against the use of systematic reasoning were intended to shock the readers of his day out of what he viewed to be the irrelevance of speculative philosophy with respect to the human condition.

29. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, pp. 195-6.

30. Moojan Momen, *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, 3:2, 1994, p. 55. Momen cites E.G. Browne "considered to be one of the greatest academics on Iran that there has ever been" (p.55) as one who dedicated himself passionately to Iranian studies as well as the Constitutional Movement.

31. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, quoted in Kaufmann, p. 127.

Be robbers and conquerors, as long as you cannot be rulers and owners, you lovers of knowledge!<sup>32</sup>

The existential point of departure is the life of the solitary individual living or being-in-the-world.<sup>33</sup> Existentialists hold that being, or more concretely, life itself (existence) rather than the world of the idea (essence) should become the object of reflection. Sartre says, for example: "What they [existentialists] have in common is simply the fact that they believe *existence* comes before *essence* — or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective."<sup>34</sup> Sartre's point is valid, for if the essence is unknown, we *can* be sure of the empirical fact of our existence. Sartre was, of course, a representative of atheistic humanism, and so designated himself.<sup>35</sup> For Sartre, however, this existence could not mean any other than human existence: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."<sup>36</sup>

In Bahá'í perspective, this *vécu* or *Existenz* of the believer, the lived experience, aims at transformation or insight, a shift in consciousness, or a deepening of the spirit of wisdom, dynamics that point in large part to the great purposes of religion. This necessary connection between philosophy and life as *Lebensphilosophie* is what lies behind Ludwig Feuerbach's remark: "Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man...do not think as a thinker...think as a living, real being. think *in* existence."<sup>37</sup> Feuerbach seems to be saying that it is life itself rather than speculation which provides the *materia bruta* for philosophy, a commonplace which we are apt to forget. This is suggested by his phrase "think *in* existence." Philosophy cannot be, then, a flight from the quotidian. Thought, moreover, should reflect upon the concrete situation in order to gain its view of truth, for philosophy originated in reflections upon life's common experiences.

There is, moreover, an inexorability about the life situation which cannot be escaped and which must be willingly embraced for both spiritual transformation and reflection in depth. On this theme Martin Buber writes:

But he will not remove himself from the concrete situation as it actually is; he will, instead, enter into it, even if in the form of fighting against it. Whether field of work or field of battle, he accepts the place in which he is placed. He knows no floating of the spirit above concrete reality; to him even the sublimest spirituality is an illusion if it is not bound to the situation. Only the spirit which is bound to the situation is prized by him as bound to the *Pneuma*, the spirit of God.<sup>38</sup>

The life of the solitary individual in its relationship to the world is in Heidegger's word *Dasein*, our being-in-the-world, literally, our "being there"(Da=there. Sein=to be),<sup>39</sup> which suggests

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32. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* quoted in Kaufmann, p. 127.

33. "Being-in-the-world" is one translation of *Dasein* in Heidegger's *Being and Time* and *What is Metaphysics?*

34. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 26.

35. Sartre names both Gabriel Marcel and Jaspers as being Christian existentialists and "both professed Catholics" and the "existential atheists" among whom he places Heidegger and himself (p. 27). Marcel was certainly a professed Catholic. The same could not be said of Jaspers.

36. *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 28.

37. Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft (Zurich, 1843) p. 78. Cited in Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 89 (New York, 1964).

38. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ.:Humanities Press International, reprint 1988) pp. 37-38.

39. Heidegger has himself explained the meaning of *Dasein* in the introductory key sentence of *Being and Time* with this somewhat obscure statement: "Das "Wesen" des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz" ("The essence of being there (Dasein) lies in its existence").

an openness, an availability or sensitivity to the emerging, unfolding world around us, or in Gabriel Marcel's word a "*disponibilité*" (availability) which "connotes openness, abandonment of self, welcoming" of persons and events and which, for Marcel, is an expression of hope.<sup>40</sup> Existential theism does not, moreover, ignore or deny the malaise of the spiritual subject who is in some sense dislocated or not whole because he or she lives in a world that seems to contrive to impede both happiness and spiritual transformation. Writer-poet-theologian G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote amusingly about his own dislocation in the world until the following insight came to him:

The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do *not* fit in to the world. I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God...The modern philosopher told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the *wrong* place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring...I knew now why grass has always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home.<sup>41</sup>

The ancient philosophers and prophets were well aware, of course, of our being dislocated in the world, and the existential view, although it did not come to be known by that name until the post world war two period, and contrary to those who think of it strictly as an outgrowth of modern self-alienation and *angst* is really an ancient perspective of the human condition. Paul Tillich who defined himself as a fifty percent existentialist and a fifty percent essentialist,<sup>42</sup> points to the origins of existentialism in Plato's allegory of the cave in which the human being finds himself or herself estranged from the knowledge of true self: "But Plato's existentialism appears in his myth of the human soul in prison, of coming down from the world of essences into the body which is its prison, and then being liberated from the cave".<sup>43</sup>

In a Bahá'í perspective, this overcoming of alienation from God and self involves the recovery of the supremely important belief in self as soul, for this conviction in the existence of the divine reality imparts the message of what Gabriel Marcel called in his essay in *Homo Viator* "une métaphysique de l'espoir" (a metaphysic of hope):

I spoke of the soul. This word, so long discredited, should here be given its priority once more. We cannot help seeing that there is the closest of connections between the soul and hope. I almost think that hope is for the soul what breathing is for the living organism. Where hope is lacking the soul dries up and withers, it is no more than a function, it is merely fit to serve as an object of study to a psychology that can never register anything but its location or absence. It is precisely the soul that is the traveller; it is of the soul and of the soul alone that we can say with supreme truth that "being" necessarily means "being on the

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(p.42) [check reference] *Dasein* referred to typically human existence and was the prelude to the greater discussion of *Sein* (Being).

40. James C. Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 355.

41. Jarsolav Pelikan comments in his introduction to Chesterton's extract from *Orthodoxy* that although Chesterton "was not a scholar or a theologian but a journalist and the author of the popular Father Brown detective stories" that nevertheless "in books on Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas, and in two interconnected works entitled *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, he defended the integrity of the theological tradition with a vigor that many professional theologians and scholars could (and did) envy." (p. 385) Jarsolav Pelikan ed., *The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990). Quote from Chesterton is from pp. 389-390.

42. Paul Tillich, *Perspectives On 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* (New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 245.

43. Tillich, p. 244.

way" (*en route*).<sup>44</sup>

Existential theism moreover values the personal. It puts the person above the proposition. "Personal" refers here to a perceptible, dynamic, interactive, and fully alive dimension that glimpses into the intimacies of the drama of the soul and the transpersonal space shared by the community of persons. Buber writes that "...every genuine religious experience has an open or a hidden personal character, for it is spoken out of a concrete situation in which the person takes part as a person".<sup>45</sup> This "hidden personal character" indicates that the personal also contains elements of the esoteric or the mysterious.

Believing existentialism looks at the universe as a dialogue with a "Thou", a "Thou" which Buber expounded as a new epistemology based on the notion of *Begegnung* (meeting/encounter). "All real living is meeting",<sup>46</sup> wrote Buber. In all of the spiritual events that impact upon the soul one finds the encounter of a greater "Thou" with a lesser "thou", a greater Personal Being speaking to a lesser personal being. Buber writes: "In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of the breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou."<sup>47</sup> This "Thou" is nothing other than the holy, the numinous or the sacred encountered in the process of becoming.

The encounter or *Begegnung* with the divine, self, other or event takes on essentially two forms: *the existential moment* and *the epiphanic moment*. The existential moment is apocalyptic. Its strongest psychological element is unpredictability or surprise. It is a sudden meeting. Its psychological elements are various: ambivalence, suspense, confusion, anger, despair, grief, anxiety, or in Kierkegaard's phrase "fear and trembling".<sup>48</sup> In its ultimate form the existential moment brings "the sickness unto death".<sup>49</sup> It is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The existential moment radically alters consciousness and leaves us for better or worse. It is in reality a disguised

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44. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York, N.Y.: Harper Torchbooks, 1962) pp. 10-11. For a further discussion of the metaphysic of hope, see Marcel's "Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope" in *Homo Viator*, pp. 29-67.

45. Buber, *Eclipse of God*, p. 37.

46. *I and Thou* p. 11. Joseph Dabney Bettis makes this cogent description of *Begegnung* in his forward to extracts from Buber's *I and Thou*: "There are times when the "other" breaks through our worlds and confronts us as a being which exists in itself and apart from our interaction with it. In these encounters there is no longer any question of our controlling and shaping the being which confronts us: it presents itself to us as something real in itself. This confrontation Buber calls the "I-Thou relationship". Joseph Dabney Bettis, *Phenomenology of Religion, Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion* (London:SCM Press Ltd, 1969), p. 220.

47. *I and Thou*, p. 6.

48. From the title of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard considered these books from the aesthetic point of view to be "the most perfect" books that he had ever written. Translator's note, p. 18. [edition] The prose of these texts is remarkably free of that strain and passion that is so characteristic of much of his other writing. *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death* are characterised by a simplicity and a philosophical lucidity uncharacteristic of most of Kierkegaard's other writings.

49. *The Sickness Unto Death* remains to this day the preeminent study in the psychology of despair and was very influential on the thinking of the existentialists who followed Kierkegaard such as Heidegger and Sartre. Kierkegaard explains that the sickness unto death is despair. Since death would mean the end of despair, he argues that "...the torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the situation of the moribund when lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die — -yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available" (pp. 150-151). Sartre, of course, went one step forward and offered his own solution to despair in *Le Suicide*. Critics of Sartre said that this book was responsible for the suicides of more than one depressed French intellectual whom he had apparently convinced.

form of a meeting with the *alter ego*, the spiritual self that is seeking to emerge, the potential true believer who is now being forced to peel away the mask of the old self so that the new might emerge, a continual process that can be both acutely painful and challenging to the self's spiritual resources.

In this spiritual crisis, or "life test",<sup>50</sup> one is brought face to face with one's own finitude, weakness or powerlessness to control or direct an event or recognize its full import. The event seems rather to direct us. In this moment of spiritual crisis, a hostile and sometimes unpredictable world rises up as other [It] to confront the believer. The contrary experiences brought on by suffering and eventual death which the believer unavoidably faces in the world, provide at the same time a silver lining in the sometimes dark cloud of existence. Tests and difficulties create an opportunity for the believer either to choose or to reject the realm of spiritual values, to embrace or to reject the Word of God, to follow the path of the insistent, elemental self or submit in following the ways of God. It is worth noting in this context that in Chinese the word for "crisis" is made of two symbols: one means danger, the other opportunity. These two symbols are closely related to the meaning of the existential moment — a moment in which the fate of our spiritual development, even our soul, hangs in the balance.

In the existential moment, the believer comes face to face with the lower self, either in oneself or others, which Shoghi Effendi writes can develop — at the extreme end of the spectrum — into "a monster of selfishness".<sup>51</sup> If we have come to know the ideal self as found in the first valley of *The Four Valleys* (*Châhâr Vâdi*) in the station of: "On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned."<sup>52</sup>, now we come to know the lower self as "O QUINTESSENCE OF PASSION", or "O REBELLIOUS ONES", or "O CHILDREN OF FANCY", or "O WEED THAT SPRINGETH OUT OF THE DUST".<sup>53</sup>

The existential moment is a moment of high realism. It catapults the believer into the realm of the real. It makes theoretical concerns comparatively unreal by the imposition of its unavoidable stark realism. This note of profound realism in relation to spiritual development was also struck by Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) when he pointed to the difference between character and faith:

There is a difference between character and faith; it is often very hard to accept this fact and put up with it, but the fact remains that a person may believe in and love the Cause—even to being ready to die for it—and yet not have a good personal character, or possess traits at variance with the teachings. We should try to change, to let the power of God help recreate us and make us true Bahá'ís in deed as well as in belief. But sometimes the process is slow, sometimes it never happens because the individual does not try hard enough. But these

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50. I have explored this notion of "life test" in "A Paradigm of Spirituality and Life Tests" in *Dimensions in Spirituality. Reflections on the Meaning of Spiritual Life and Transformation in Light of the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994) pp. 128-158.

51. Shoghi Effendi makes a binary distinction in the Bahá'í understanding of the self. One is the divine self, the identity of the individual created God; the other is the ego "...the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on." From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, December 10, 1947 in Helen Hornby, comp., *Lights of Guidance A Bahá'í Reference File* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) p. 421:1144.

52. *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, trans. M. Gail with A.K. Khan. 3d ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978), p. 50.

53. The epithets are from *The Hidden Words*, the Persian, nos. 50, 65, 67 and 68 respectively.

things cause us suffering and are a test to us...<sup>54</sup>

Instead of making an ideal preaching, instead of encouraging the believer to rise to new heights of spirituality and moral excellence, Shoghi Effendi strikes in this passage a chord of profound and open realism. He acknowledges, moreover, that the believer does not always attain the hoped for end, a condition that produces suffering and trial. The reverse side of the existential moment is the epiphanic moment. Also of sudden onset, and by contrast with the weight of the existential moment, the epiphanic moment is a moment of exaltation, of great illumination or triumph when we are in the phrase of C.S. Lewis, "surprised by joy".<sup>55</sup> This epiphanic moment is a numinous disclosure of glory, an experience of awe or reverence, triumph or celebration, a hierophany that looms up large with promise and exaltation. It is Bahá'u'lláh in the garden of Ridván,<sup>56</sup> and all the lesser reflections of that spiritual event. It is the believer winning the desires of the heart. It may be a divine healing, a mystical encounter, or the certitude that our lesser will has become one with the greater Will of God.

### Thoughts on Existential Meaning in Bahá'í History and Sacred Scripture

The patterns of existential experience lie, however, not only in the life of the ordinary believer, but also in sacred history and in scripture. For sacred history is not merely the documented, detached and detailed reconstruction of events, but it also allows for a more profound and personal interpretation of the record, since sacred history is also salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*). Salvation history cannot be reduced merely to an "objective" study of events but may also be interpreted as both unfolding drama and divine dialectic. Sacred history's tragic and triumphant events disclose a depth of meaning both for spirituality and for human values. Salvation history is profoundly human because it revolves around the lives of sacred figures and their followers who have become models of soteriology and the transformed spiritual life.

The acts and events in the lives of the Prophets and spiritual teachers have profound meaning for the spirituality of the believer, for their missions were carried out amidst continual persecution and hardship, both real and threatened. The spirituality exemplified in the lives of the Manifestations of God is consequently not merely theoretical but profoundly authentic. The forty year period of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and exile, for example, is ripe with manifold meanings that shed light on a life devoted to God and divine truth, a life consecrated to the unity of humanity, and lived out in face of the severest of adversities. Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment and successive banishments (1853-1892), whether by the imposition of the sovereign's decree, or resulting from his own voluntary exile into the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih in Kurdistan (1854-1856), affords an opportunity for the believer to consider how he or she also might face feelings of exile, alienation,

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54. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, October 17, 1944 quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life Selections from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith* (The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í of Canada, 1983), p. 20.

55. *Surprised by Joy* (Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1986) is the title of C.S. Lewis' spiritual autobiography in which he describes his conversion from atheism to Christianity. The title, however, does not describe Lewis' actual conversion experience which was as he has specified "not to Christianity" but to theism (p. 184) and which he has described as "strangely unemotional" (p. 179), for it was a conversion to the realisation of free choice. Riding on top of a bus in Oxford, "going up Headington Hill", Lewis felt himself to be entrapped in a suit of armour or a kind of "corslet". Lewis became acutely conscious at that moment that he had been given the free choice either to keep this armour on or unbuckle it and go free. He was given the freedom to choose, but he did not seem to be able to do otherwise than to choose God. "Then came the repercussion on the imaginative level", says Lewis. "I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt...I rather disliked the feeling. (p. 179)

56. For a moving poetic envisioning of this unparalleled spiritual event see Robert Hayden's poem "Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan" in *Selected Poems* (New York, N.Y.: October House, 1966)

loneliness and hardship in his own life.

The references from the Bahá'í writings chosen here as pertinent to the existential condition are conveyed through two micro-narrative in *The Seven Valleys* (*Haft Vádí*) and *The Four Valleys* (*Cháhár Vádí*). Both narratives are concerned with the theme of the loss and recovery of true self and the nature of faith. The renowned literary critic Northrop Frye has written that the theme of estrangement from self and its recovery is the grand theme of all literature: "The story of the loss and regaining of identity, is, I think, the framework of all literature..."<sup>57</sup> Following Frye's statement, one would consequently expect to find this theme in sacred literature, and certainly one can find it in the Bahá'í writings.

The first story features the *personae* of the mystic and the grammarian who find themselves in the unnamed first valley of *The Four Valleys*. Both travellers come to the "Sea of Grandeur", a metonymical phrase for God. The station of the self in this valley is the self as soul, the personal self. This is indicated by the highly evocative, transpersonal language Bahá'u'lláh employs. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "One must, then, read the book of his own self, rather than some treatise on rhetoric. Wherefore He [God] hath said: "Read thy Book: There needeth none but thyself to make out an account against thee this day."<sup>58</sup>

The quaranic quotation cited by Bahá'u'lláh raises the question of individual responsibility in attempting the challenging pursuit of self-knowledge. One must begin to read one's own self as one would read a book. One should begin to find meaning and understanding in the pages of one's own life. This theme of taking responsibility for finding personal meaning is moreover one of the cherished themes of existentialist writers, philosophers and psychologists. Viktor Frankl, for example, has emphasized that taking responsibility for one's own mental and spiritual health, rather than submitting passively to the outrages of fortune, is one of the precipitators of healing.<sup>59</sup> The brevity of Bahá'u'lláh's fragmentary story is more than compensated for by the impact of its message:

The story is told of a mystic knower, who went on a journey with a learned grammarian as his companion. They came to the shore of the Sea of Grandeur. The knower straightway flung himself into the waves, but the grammarian stood lost in his reasonings, which were as words that are written on water. The knower called out to him, "Why dost thou not follow?" The grammarian answered, "O Brother, I dare not advance. I must needs go back again." Then the knower cried, "Forget what thou didst read in the books of Sibavayh and Qawlavayh, of Ibn-i-Hájib and Ibn-i-Málík, and cross the water."<sup>60</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh then quotes from Rúmí's *Mathnaví*: "The death of self is needed here, not rhetoric/Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves."<sup>61</sup> Although this mini-tale could easily lend

57. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto:C.B.C. Publications, 1970), p. 21.

58. *The Four Valleys*, p. 51. The quaranic reference is from 17:15.

59. This is one of the main themes in Frankl's *logotherapy*, a psychological technique that consists in the alleviation of suffering through the search for meaning. Viktor Frankl was more than a clinician and an armchair philosopher since as a death-camp inmate he was subjected to all the rigours and deprivations of concentration camp life about which he wrote: "...in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of prisoner the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him — mentally and spiritually." *Man's Search for Meaning An Introduction to Logotherapy*, (New York, N.Y.:Pocket Books, 1973), p. 105.

60. *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 51.

61. *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, p. 52.

itself to lengthy commentary, there are three elements which link it to existential concerns. First, there is the wholehearted commitment to the life of faith exemplified by the mystic knower who is very reminiscent of Kierkegaard's Abraham as the "knight of faith",<sup>62</sup> the one who makes that supreme act of will, the "leap of faith"(Springet)<sup>63</sup>, and summoning up courage, walks across the water. He stands in marked contrast to the hesitant grammarian. One of the symbolic meanings of walking on water is the death of self, or overcoming nature, for to walk upon water is not only to defy nature but to overcome it. Second, the story puts some definite limitations on the abilities of reason to understand God. Bahá'u'lláh's tale is an inferred strong critique of the powers of reason to put us in touch with divine reality. The grammarian's desire to return to his books was in reality a desire to return to the logical forms of knowledge on which he relied, whereas the mystic knower's experience of God is clearly in the realm of *le vécu*, that transcendent direct experience which transports the seeker into some larger, more synthetic and all-encompassing experience of the divine, an experience that is based on more intuitive, non-discursive forms of knowing. For the existential perspective does not involve primarily analysis, that is the breaking down of a thing into its constituent parts, but rather a holistic interpretation of life experience. When believing existentialism interprets a part of life, it does so in order to interpret it as a constituent of the whole. This holistic view of reality can be found in such writers as Jaspers, Heidegger and Kierkegaard, for they aim at some unified vision of the self with the world.<sup>64</sup>

In the story of the mystic and the grammarian, it is the heroic self of the true believer that emerges when the mystic knower casts behind him the despair and doubt that is left in reason's wake, and leaps into the Sea of Reality. By taking this "leap of faith", the seeker finds the courage to defy the violence of logic and the dictates of reason that command the protection and preservation of self. But instead of sinking beneath the waves and drowning, the mystic knower defies gravity, rises above and walks on water. One notes also in passing the quick turnabout of events, the sudden "great reversal".<sup>65</sup> Instead of *falling* into the sea, as humanity's original parents

62. *Fear and Trembling* excogitates upon Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. It contests the Hegelian notion of a system or science of universals or absolutes by a juxtaposition and contrast of the individual, represented by Abraham, who chooses to violate a universal ethical norm (infanticide) which requires the sacrifice of his beloved offspring. Kierkegaard says: "The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others" (p. 90). "The true knight of faith is always absolute isolation, the false knight is sectarian." (p. 89)

63. Kierkegaard was quick to acknowledge his debt to Lessing in his elaboration of the idea of the leap. See Kierkegaard's *Papirer V*. B 1, 3, p. 53. For both Lessing and Kierkegaard truth meant religious truth and the gap that had to be overcome was the accidental or contingent nature of historical truth with the "unconditional certainty required by religious faith." See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London:Routledge, 1991), p. 98.

64. For example, in Jaspers's three modes of "encompassing" (empirical existence, consciousness, and spirit),... "spirit is the process of fusing and constructing all totalities in a present which is never finished yet always fulfilled. It is always on its way toward a possible completion of empirical existence where universality, the whole, and every particular would all be members of a totality." Karl Jaspers, *Existenzphilosophie* in Kaufmann, p. 216.

65. The idea of the "great reversal" has universal implications that transcend its immediate Bábí-Bahá'í origins, but I put the phrase back into its historical-scriptural context. The phrase "the great reversal", synonymous with *vav va makousé* (*the reversed vav*), occurs in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (1753-1826 CE), founder of the Shaykhí school of Islam. Al-Ahsá'í interpreted the inverted or reversed Arabic letter *wáw* when written out in full (*wáw-alif-wáw*) as a sign of the advent of the promised Qá'im. In a tablet written to George David Hardegg (1812-1879) (*Lawh-i-Hirtík*), Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the great reversal:"O Friend! Observe the "mystery of the Great Reversal in the sign of the Sovereign"...Call thou to mind the fact that when Jesus came he was rejected by the divines, the learned and the educated whilst he who was a mere fisherman entered the Kingdom" (Provisional translation Stephen N. Lambden). In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (para. 157) Bahá'u'lláh also writes: "Behold, the "mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign" hath now been made manifest." With these words Bahá'u'lláh alludes to his own coming as fulfilment of prophecy. The great reversal refers more specifically to the eschatological phenomenon of the inversion of spiritual status between clergy and laity at the advent of the Prophet. The divines who reject Husayn Ali, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) are cast down, and the laity who accept him

fell from primordial grace, the mystic knower *rises*. The spatial metaphor speaks abundantly of the powers of the "leap of faith", of the concerted will to trust in the powers of God and the search, instead of a capitulation to the doubting Thomas within. The spatial metaphor of walking upon the water is particularly effective in this context, for the leap of faith has the double effect, not only of creating a sense of empowerment, but also an impression of space, for the mystic traveller has been freed up and released from the gravitational weight of self.

The Christian parallel to Bahá'u'lláh's text is the Gospel account of Peter's attempt, in a sorry imitation of Christ, to walk upon the water when Jesus came to the disciples in "the fourth watch of the night...walking on the sea". (v. 25) (Matthew 14: 25-31) Like the mystic knower, who can moreover be interpreted as a veiled illusion to Bahá'u'lláh himself, Christ bids the disciple to walk upon the water, but Peter "when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." (v. 30) The rest of the story is familiar: Jesus stretches out his hand and catches Peter as he is about to sink into the waves and saves him. But Christ's pointed remark to Peter is significant, for it provides the moral meaning to the tale: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (v. 31) The dispelling of doubt is also one of the object lessons of Bahá'u'lláh's micro-tale. Although the grammarian was a learned man, and Peter an unschooled fisherman, both individuals were summoned to leave behind "the baser stages of doubt",<sup>66</sup> and to throw themselves into that dimension of faith which is not characterised by philosophic reasoning, but essentially by faith defined as belief and implicit trust in the Divine Power that is greater than ourselves.

Bahá'u'lláh clearly has in mind to dispel such states of doubt and despair, not only in the mystical treatise of *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, but also in the *Kitáb-i-Iqán [Book of Certitude]*. In his doctrinal *magnum opus* Bahá'u'lláh sets out "the essential prerequisites for the attainment by every true seeker of the object of his quest".<sup>67</sup> These spiritual requisites are accomplished by the practice of ardent search, spiritual passion, ethical discipline, and a spirituality of detachment.

The realism of the gospel narrative is also noteworthy. Matthew does not hide the fact that Peter failed his test of faith, as he will fail later another test of faith when he is accused of being the Nazarene's companion during Christ's trial. (Matt. 26: 69-75) Because he feared the annihilation of his own being, Peter denied the One that he loved more than everything in the world, everything except his own life. Peter's test was resolved, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, with untold remorse<sup>68</sup>, after which he became the *petros*, the "rock" that Christ had named him. The tests of Peter, which appeared on the surface as massive failures, proved to be ultimately the means of attaining his predestined station as the rock of faith. Also present in Peter's existential moment is the paradoxical indication that failure participates profoundly in the means of ultimate success.

are exalted to the position of spiritual eminence formerly enjoyed by these same divines. I draw here upon Stephen Lambden's 'The Translation and Significance of a Shaykhí Phrase in the "Most Holy Book" (*al-Kitáb al-aqdas*):"The Mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign (sírr al-tankís li-ramz al-ra'ís)', paper delivered at the U.K. A.B.S.-E.S.E. Religious Studies Special Interest Group Seminar, July 1993. See the *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* for further details.

66. The complete quotation is: "O FLEETING SHADOW! Pass beyond the baser stages of doubt and rise to the exalted heights of certainty. Open the eye of truth, that thou mayest behold the veilless Beauty and exclaim: Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators!" *The Hidden Words*, Persian, p. 9.

67. *God Passes By*, p. 139. Shoghi Effendi refers to those passages of the *Iqán* which deal with the true seeker (pp. 192-196).

68. "Even the glorious Peter was not rescued from the flame of trials, and wavered. Then he repented and mourned the mourning of a bereaved one and his lamentation raised unto the Supreme Concourse." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from a tablet to an American believer, December 23, 1902 in *Star of the West*, 8:19, March 2, 1918.

The other story, borrowed from Rúmí's *Mathnáví* by Bahá'u'lláh,<sup>69</sup> is a brief but bright gem of spiritual literature. It is the story of the lost lover

refound, the story of the bereaved Majnún who finds his beloved Laylí again in a garden. This little story is the ultimate allegory in the banishment of despair when the seeker is suddenly surprised by the joy of the soul's reunion with God:

There was once a lover who had sighed for long years in separation from his beloved, and wasted in the fire of remoteness. From the rule of love, his heart was empty of patience, and his body weary of his spirit; he reckoned life without her as a mockery, and time consumed him away. How many a day he found no rest in longing for her; how many a night the pain of her kept him from sleep; his body was worn to a sigh, his heart's wound had turned him to a cry of sorrow. He had given a thousand lives for one taste of the cup of her presence, but it availed him not. The doctors knew no cure for him, and companions avoided his company; yea, physicians have no medicine for one sick of love, unless the favor of the beloved one deliver him.

At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to ashes. Then one night he could live no more, and he went out of his house and made for the market-place. On a sudden, a watchman followed after him. He broke into a run, with the watchman following; than other watchmen came together, and barred every passage to the weary one. And the wretched one cried from his heart, and ran here and there, and moaned to himself: "Surely this watchman is 'Izrá'il, my angel of death, following so fast upon me; or he is a tyrant of men, seeking to harm me." His feet carried him on, the one bleeding with the arrow of love, and his heart lamented. Then he came to a garden wall, and with untold pain he scaled it, for it proved very high; and forgetting his life, he threw himself down to the garden.

And there he beheld his beloved with a lamp in her hand, searching for a ring she had lost. When the heart-surrendered lover looked on his ravishing love, he drew a great breath and raised up his hands in prayer, crying: "O God! Give Thou glory to the watchman, and riches and long life. For the watchman was Gabriel, guiding this poor one; or he was Isráfil, bringing life to this wretched one!"<sup>70</sup>

This spiritual allegory can be viewed as providing both fulfilment and closure to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve which 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us is really a story about the bondage and liberation of the soul.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the spiritual allegory of the tale of Majnún and Laylí can be viewed as having larger implications for the collective spiritual destiny of the human race. Salvation history which began — at least in the Abrahamic faiths — with the banishment of humanity's original parents from a garden in the Middle East is fulfilled in a garden by a modern day Iranian

69. See Rúmí, *Mathnáví* in Nicholson's translation. The original version of Bahá'u'lláh's elaboration is found in "The Unworthy Lover", vol. 2, pp. 275-76 corresponding to the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth *Dáftár*.

70. *The Seven Valleys*, pp. 13-14.

71. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "It [the story of Adam and Eve] contains divine mysteries and universal meanings and it is capable of marvellous explanations." (p.123) 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strong critique of literal interpretations of the story suggest its pronounced mythical features. He weaves a number of themes into his explanation while inviting the reader to search for others. (p. 126) I vastly reduce one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thematic explanations to this paraphrase: Adam and Eve are the symbols of spirit (Adam) and soul (Eve). The serpent signifies Adam's attachment/love/bondage to the human world. Since the serpent continues to live in the midst of Adam's descendants, the descendants persist in living in bondage, at enmity with God and in strife with one another. The Tree of Life is symbolic of the Divine Word or the Divine Manifestations of Christ and Bahá'u'lláh who offer salvation and release from bondage by their sanctifying grace and the light of divine knowledge. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá's fuller account see "Adam and Eve" in *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 122-26.

Prophet who has commanded the *cherubim* to withdraw their flaming swords and open the way once more to the tree of life.<sup>72</sup> Further, Bahá'u'lláh's mystical story of the loss and regain of the beloved in the form of a triumphant theophany strikes a resounding note of victory over despair through a recovery of the seeker's heart's desire and alludes to the fulfilment of humanity's spiritual destiny as it finds its way back to the garden. With Bahá'u'lláh's recasting of Rúmí's story, we come full circle.

Bahá'u'lláh's narrative, like other scriptural discourse, is unsparing in its realism. It does not avert the most distressing elements in human existence: loneliness and alienation, loss, acute pain, the thwarting of the desires of the heart, even terror and impending death. Neither can other psychological implications of the story go unnoticed. With Bahá'u'lláh's use of the word "despair" (Per. *Ya'ass*), we plummet with the bereaved Majnún to the nadir of his depression. Majnún is driven even further beyond the limits of sanity to the very edge of madness, where he contemplates self-destruction. The Persian Prophet's allegory of the lost lover refound even contains Sartre's notion of *Huit Clos*, of no exit, of the lover's being hemmed in on all sides by the watchmen (Per. *assasshá*) who are the symbols of all the conspiring forces of evil. Majnún's is the overwhelming trauma and drama of the lover who cannot live without love, and who lives and dies for love alone. The implications for a theology of hope are there as well in the final resolution of the story.

Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in laying bare such a momentarily abject theme is to hold up the promise of healing and salvation for the distressed soul. He intimates that the experience of such distressing psychological states can be the prelude to healing and joy and a fuller integration of self. It is worth noting, moreover, that despair and disillusion have a legitimate role to play in the search for love and truth. Kierkegaard was to proclaim that "Every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life."<sup>73</sup> Bahá'u'lláh's phrase the "true seeker"<sup>74</sup> also clearly implies that no one would ever become a seeker if he or she were not in the first place profoundly dissatisfied, disoriented or disillusioned with the spiritual status quo, the state of one's soul, or the condition of the world. By contrast, both the self and characters in existentialist literature and philosophy remain trapped in their own morass. For, if as Sartre has said in *L'être et le néant*, (*Being and Nothingness*), "Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by selecting his own nothingness."<sup>75</sup>, then the prospects are bleak indeed. Bahá'u'lláh, however, does provide a way out. His allegory of the soul's ultimate reunion with its Creator promises the brightest tokens of God's love and mercy. For, the bereaved lover believed himself to be lost whereas he was in reality saved. His salvation was reunion with God.

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72. See Genesis 3:24. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "O YE DWELLERS IN THE HIGHEST PARADISE! Proclaim unto the children of assurance that within the realms of holiness, nigh unto the celestial paradise, a new garden hath appeared, round which circle the denizens of the realm on high and the immortal dwellers of the exalted paradise. Strive, then, that ye may attain that station, that ye may unravel the mysteries of love from its wind-flowers and learn the secret of divine and consummate wisdom from its eternal fruits. Solaced are the eyes of them that enter and abide therein!" *The Hidden Words*, Persian, n.18.

73. *Either/Or*, II (Princeton: [publisher] 1946), p. 175.

74. *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 192.

75. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 28.

