

Correlating Mystical Experience to the Knowledge of God

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Introduction

This paper addresses the theme of this conference, mysticism and the Bahá'í writings, in the dual perspective of philosophical theology, and the psychology of religion, a perspective that is based on the Bahá'í sacred writings in correlation to both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í theology; that is, it engages in a correlation of the beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith with its own belief system and with that of non-Bahá'í theologians and scholars. As the title indicates, a correlation is made between mystical experience and the knowledge of God. The thesis of this paper is not a novel one but it is one that has great bearing on the epistemological understanding of religion; namely, that theology, which I am defining simply as "the knowledge of God," and mystical experience are not two distinct and unrelated forms of activity, but rather expressions of one manifold. In other words, experience and knowledge — in this case mystical experience and the knowledge of God — in circuitous fashion, inform and depend upon one other. This process I am calling symbiosis. Such a process, I point out, is not essentially speculative, as it might first appear, but is rather empirical and commonplace since experience has always been a fundamental component of learning whether scientific or humanistic.

I shall be validating this thesis through a general rather than "hard proof" discussion of the following points: (1) Debunking certain objections to mysticism (2) Underscoring the need to validate mystical experience in Bahá'í scholarship (3) Outlining four basic characteristics of mysticism (4) Discussing symbiosis in relation to the epistemology of *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* and the *Kitab-i-Iqán* through a correlation to the metaphysics of inner experience of St. Augustine (5) Symbiosis shall also be discussed by way of correlation to the views of David Tracy, one of Christendom's current foremost pluralist theologians and the genial Father Thomas Merton, one of the twentieth centuries most prolific writers on things spiritual and theological. (6) Considerations of Bahá'u'lláh's universe of the seven valleys will be discussed as being within the realm of the attainable rather than unattainable spiritual experiences.

A Few Methodological Observations

Before proceeding, I open a brief parenthesis on a question that in the 1970's and 1980's sparked a lengthy discussion and debate within the study of religion. I refer to the question of methodology, a question that relates directly to the work of all Bahá'í scholars and particularly to those scholars engaged in textual criticism or analysis. We all agree, of course, that any Bahá'í theology, a concept that was until recently looked upon with extreme scepticism in some circles of the Bahá'í Faith, be text-rooted. But I think it is vitally important that scriptural statements which are brought to light through the work of textualists, those who engage in translation of scripture with learned commentary, be correlated, to use a seminal concept of Shoghi Effendi, to the concerns of science and non-Bahá'í higher thought. Correlation is a method and indeed a philosophy in itself, over which I have lingered in one section of my current study of the writings of Shoghi Effendi. Before proceeding, I make a few brief comments about it here.

As you know, Shoghi Effendi advocated a method of correlation in order to relate the Bahá'í Faith "to modern aspects of philosophy and science" and "to correlate" the Bahá'í Faith to "all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today"^[1] and "to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and *to correlate* them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science."^[2] The following statement, through his secretary, also links Bahá'í scholarship to the principle of correlation:

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can *correlate* its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.^[3]

Another letter containing similar phraseology says that scholars should be capable of : "...correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of leaders of society."^[4] These phrases "...correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of leaders of society." and "with the current thoughts and problems of the peoples of the world" should serve to bring Bahá'í scholarship down out of the ivory tower and into the "real world" by allowing scholars of all legitimate types and tendencies to engage in what Wittgenstein called, in another context, *praxis*, a term that has been imported into theology by such thinkers as the University of Chicago's David Tracy, to refer to the practical application of theological principles.^[5] In hermeneutics, *praxis* also refers to the actual interpretation of texts rather than the theories upon which hermeneutics is based.

As indicated by the current state of Bahá'í scholarship, subjective hermeneutics, that is, scholarly applications of scripture to other areas of the curriculum, is practically non-existent. There is little work being done that provides some wider overarching meaning of scripture that correlates its significance to the human condition and to related fields of scientific or scholarly inquiry. It seems likely that this development will eventually emerge as the important foundational work of translation and commentary goes forward, reaches a plateau phase and begins to diversify. More subjective, wide-ranging and allusive approaches will no doubt build on the valuable contribution currently being made by those textualists working in the *tafsir* tradition.

Although this is not the place to go into this question in any detail, Shoghi Effendi's recognition and recommendation of the principle of correlation finds a parallel in the more complex principle of the same name employed by the great systematic theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965). Tillich's monumental three volume work, the *Systematic Theology* (1951-1963),^[6] is based upon a method of correlation, one that is basically apologetic. Tillich who was both an essentialist and existentialist theologian explained that the epistemological method of correlation is understood as "interdependence of two independent factors" which exist "between existential questions and theological answers."^[7] Tillich's point on the convergence between the temporal, existentialist 'situation' and 'the power of the eternal message' can be applied *grosso modo* to `Abdu'l-Bahá's distinction made between the revelation of eternal spiritual principles within the various social settings and conditions that occur within the temporal flux of the history of civilizations.^[8] I also note in passing that Plato in *The Republic* put forward a correlative principle of education when he said: "...Some will then be chosen for higher privilege. The studies which they pursued without order in their early years will now be brought together, and the students will see the relationship of these studies to one another and to truth." "Yes," he said. "That is the only kind of knowledge which takes lasting root."^[9]

I think one can apply Tillich's point, without fear of contradiction, to the method of question and answer as a learning style or mode of knowledge employed in such texts as the Questions and Answers^[10] section of Bahá'u'lláh's *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and `Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*.^[11] I mention in passing that I have in my current work in progress, argued that the correlation of question and answer in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and `Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions* presents two models of truth, open and closed.^[12] But suffice it to say that the method of question and answer has profounder implications than we sometimes realise, as does the method of correlation itself.

Debunking Objections to Mysticism

After these opening remarks, I come to the main arguments of the paper. The charge that genuine mystical experience is a manifestation of nothing but various forms of mental pathology whether hysteria, epilepsy or insanity seems to me to be without foundation. Individuals who are mentally ill may experience isolated identifiers of mystical experience such as out-of-body experiences or mind/body disassociation in which functional anaesthesia may or may not occur — trance-like states — but these indicators, as William James says in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-1902) are only "superficial medical talk."^[13] They do not "inquire into their fruits for life."^[14] In Bahá'í scholarship, Moojan Momen's "The Psychology of Mysticism and its Relationship to the Bahá'í Faith" in the *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* (1984) examines the topic from a clinical point of view. Depending on the reading given, Dr. Momen's paper could be cited either to validate the mystical experience or to explain it away. The clinical data that he advances could be read to indicate that in brain studies the chemical apparatus does indeed exist for the possibility of mystical experience to take place. On the other hand, a more skeptical reading would find that such experiences are largely explained in terms of biochemical reactions.^[15]

We may certainly agree with Dr. Momen that pathology sometimes masquerades as mysticism or that mystical states resemble in some of their features drug-induced states of consciousness. But when one reads accounts of the mystics themselves, their speech is sometimes punctuated with that joy or delight which reflects what William James calls in the Gifford Lectures of 1901, published as his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a generally "optimistic"^[16] frame of mind, expressive of what James has called a "religion of healthy-mindedness."^[17]

The fact remains that true mystics, whatever St. John of the Cross-like "dark nights of the soul"^[18] they might experience on the spiritual journey, even if these dark nights may take on at times certain pathological aspects remain, in William James' phrase, "healthy-minded" individuals. However, we should not be surprised by this. Bahá'u'lláh clearly summons the "true seeker" to attain the presence of God and any mystical states attained as a result of the seeker's ardent search to reach the Celestial City of the Word of God, he describes in terms of a profuse mystical rhapsody or ecstasy. However, on a cautionary note, Shoghi Effendi, in a letter to an individual that I shall return to later, has also indicated certain cautions vis-à-vis seeking out or pursuing what we might call self-generated mystical experiences.^[19]

Despite the varieties that mark their idiosyncratic subjective experiences, the unanimous voice with which mystics speak of the supernatural states of the soul interacting intimately with the Divine or with spiritual forces in transcendent worlds, creates in those who seek to share in these experiences a willingness to listen to their voice. The mystics offer to those who have not had the experience "hypotheses"^[20] as

William James has written, of a divine life which is more dramatic and real than anything thus far imagined or experienced.

Aside from the associations with mental pathology, there have been two other main objections to mysticism. The first is that mysticism is only a pseudo form of knowledge, an intensely personal and erratic subjective experience inaccessible to the explorations of the philosopher who makes use of discursive reason in analysing the world. The other objection is that mysticism — and this objection has also been made to the quality of the faith state itself — is a privileged experience of grace and lacks universal public accessibility. The second objection will be addressed below. As for the first, it has already been debunked by Max Weber in his famous book *The Sociology of Religion*. I quote Weber:

The unique character of mystical knowledge consists in the fact that, although it becomes more incommunicable the more strongly it is characterized by idiosyncratic content, it is nevertheless, recognized as knowledge. For mystical knowledge is not new knowledge of any facts or doctrines, but rather the perception of an overall meaning in the world. This usage of "knowledge" is intended wherever the terms occurs in the numerous formulations of mystics; it denotes a practical form of knowledge. Such gnosis is basically a "possession" of something from which there may be derived a new practical orientation to the world, and under certain circumstances even new and communicable items of knowledge. But even these items will constitute knowledge of values and non-values within the world.^[21]

The second objection, that the world of mysticism is a closed and private world fails in the light of two factors: (1) the universality of divine love (2) the efficacy of prayer and meditation as two of the most profound forms of mystical feeling and discovery. Although the extra-mundane forms of peak mystical experience would appear to be reserved for a relative few, mysticism reveals nonetheless a more universal and democratic face in another of its modes as the practice of divine love. Since the practice of divine love is an elemental form of mysticism, then all who practice the love of God share in this mysticism of love, degrees of love notwithstanding. Mysticism as the practice of divine love puts the mystical quest on a potentially universal footing, and opens a gate by which all who practice may enter.

The Need to Validate Mystical Experience in Bahá'í Scholarship

As I have written in *Dimensions in Spirituality*, "it is regrettable that very little Bahá'í scholarship to date has explored the topic of mysticism in a positive light."^[22] I have in chapter three of that same book explored certain general aspects of mysticism

under the heads "The Alchemy of Spiritual Transformation," "The Mystical Dimension," "Mysticism and the Deed," "The Lunar Phase Model of the Awakening," "The New Birth Model of the Awakening," and "Comparing the Bahá'í and Christian Experience of New Birth." There are, of course, direct connections between spirituality and mysticism since prayer and meditation are common elements to both phenomena. I have devoted chapter four "The Mystic Sense: Prayer and Meditation" to this subject.

However, the examination of mysticism in a Bahá'í perspective by scholars is not entirely a *tabula rasa* and I mention here just a few titles. In 1953 physicist Glenn Shook wrote *Mysticism, Science and Revelation* in straightforward language which gives an instructive account of mysticism in Bahá'í perspective. The book by Randie Gottlieb and Steven Gottlieb, *Once to Every Man and Nation. Stories About Becoming a Bahá'í* (1985), whose half title *Once to Every Man and Nation* is taken from James Russell Lowell's (1819-1891) anti-slavery poem of the same name. Although the main intent of this book is not to detail individual mystical experiences, in the telling one realises that Bahá'ís have indeed undergone mystical experiences in the process of being guided to the Bahá'í Faith.^[23] Rona M. Freeman's vision of Bahá'u'lláh, "The Figure in the Red Robe" is, for example, just one of these accounts.

In addition to Bahá'u'lláh's seminal mystical treatises *The Seven Valleys* (*Haft Vádi*) and *The Four Valleys* (*Cháhár Vádi*), there are numerous mystical tablets of Bahá'u'lláh from the Baghdad Period (1853-1863) such as the *Lawh-i-Kull al-Ta'am* (*The Tablet of All Food*) and the pre-Baghdad *Rashh-i-'Ama'* (*The Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing*) which have been translated by our learned friend Stephen Lambden and which are available either through such publications as *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* or privately on the Internet. Other mystical tablets have been mentioned by Shoghi Effendi on pp. 140-141 of *God Passes By*. I mention also Jalil Mahmoudi's article "Irfán, Gnosis, or Mystical Knowledge" published in *World Order* (1973) as being a thoughtful, instructive contribution to the topic. However, we should be oblivious to the fact that the Guardian described *The Seven Valleys* as "...a treatise that may well be regarded as His greatest mystical composition."^[24] Statement of the obvious though it may be, mysticism, at least in the experiences of Bahá'ís, cannot become an object of scholarly endeavour and community interest unless such experiences are recorded and researched. Otherwise, they remain unknown, private events from which others cannot benefit through either reflection or study.

Four Characteristics of Mystical Experience

I define mysticism simply as the soul's vivid attainment of the presence of God. Mystical experience, however one defines it, and while it is a very diverse phenomenon, exhibits at least the following four common characteristics. (We might

also refer to such experiences as "spiritual reality experiences" or "epiphanic moments" since the word mysticism, because its prefix is identical to its homonym "mist," suggests something vague or vaporous). The following four characteristics are, of course, not exhaustive.

(1) According to personal testimony, the mystical experience is the most direct, concrete and vivid of human experiences surpassing everyday mundane consciousness. They confer an unusual apocalyptic certitude. Such experiences are reported as being so distinctive and extraordinary that it is impossible to mistake them for other forms of consciousness. The mystic knows that he or she *is* in reality (*Al Haqq*).

(2) The literature of mysticism with reason insists on the ineffable or indescribable nature of the mystical awakening. Bahá'u'lláh himself constantly refers to the inability of simple words to capture the experiences that originate in the invisible, divine worlds. One of the more widely reported and common of mystical happenings is the evangelical Christian "born again" experience which is not entirely alien to Bahá'í spirituality. While the qualitative understanding of this experience is different in the two religions, Bahá'u'lláh does indeed refer to his followers as being "born again" in the *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh* in which the Supreme Manifestation of God says: "I render Thee thanks, therefore, and extol Thee, in the name of all them that are dear to Thee, for that Thou hast caused them to be born again, by reason of the living waters which have flowed down out of the mouth of Thy will."^[25]

We should not, however, insist too strongly on the ineffable nature of mystical experience, for to do so would make mysticism impervious to the work of the scholar. Mysticism, while its first court of appeal may lie within the subjectivities of individual certitude, must also present its findings to the more detached and objective school of reason and analysis. William James, moreover, in spite of the positive claims he makes for the outlook of the mystic, has also recorded some reservations in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* with regard to the mystic's claims. According to James, although the mystic's supernatural experiences may confer psychic certitude upon the soul making the mystic "invulnerable" in James' word in his/her convictions,^[26] these rare experiences confer upon the mystic no special authority that would warrant our uncritical acceptance of such experiences or the adoption of the personal lifestyle of the mystic.^[27]

Shoghi Effendi's caution about mystical experiences mentioned above is pertinent here. In a letter written on his behalf on October 25, 1942, the Guardian stated:

Truly mystical experiences based on reality are very rare, and we can readily see how dangerous it is for people to go groping about in the

darkness of their imagination after the true thing. That is why, as you point out, we are warned against all psychical practices by the Master. If we are going to have some deeply spiritual experience, we can rest assured that God will vouchsafe it to us without our having to look for it.^[28]

Notice also that in this response, Shoghi Effendi distinguished mystical from psychic experiences.

(3) The mystical experience conveys an unmistakable sense of certitude. There is no shadow of a doubt in your mind that this experience may be a waking dream or reverie or some murky, ill-defined half-experience being generated by your subconscious. The mystical experience is simply a direct experience of the divine, a "close encounter" with a transcendent order of being or with a transcendent Being.

(4) The mystical experience is a "hands on" direct encounter with the deeper dimensions of the soul itself, or with Bahá'u'lláh or with those various and sundry spiritual states that are described in scripture and spiritual literature. The mystic experiences first hand, directly and in a practical sense, as Max Weber has indicated in the phrase quoted earlier "...a practical form of knowledge." What for other remains just an effort of the imagination, or is a remote, inferred or first level spiritual happening is for the mystic, the real thing. In this sense, the mystical experience results in a deepening of faith, for the one so "touched by the Absolute" knows with certainty about the spiritual things that have been visited upon him, not just theoretically, but by direct experience. In this sense, mysticism can be viewed as a small 'r' revelation or disclosure of truth to the seeking soul..

Professor George Albert Coe of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, author of an early work in the psychology of religion called *The Psychology of Religion* (1916) states in his chapter on mysticism that the mystical experience produces the "Now I know for myself" reaction which, he says, "is extremely satisfying to the individual who has it, even regardless of its particular content."^[29] Thus, mysticism must be included in the broad definition of the search for truth. Coe writes: "Mysticism fascinates men partly because it produces, more largely because it promises, this exquisitely satisfying sense of individual selfhood."^[30] The mystical experience helps, then, to heal the divided self and produces wholeness in the individual.

The Symbiosis of Knowledge and Experience

Bahá'u'lláh's two main mystical treatises *The Seven Valleys (Haft Vádí)* and *The Four Valleys (Cháhár Vádí)* conjointly with His preeminent doctrinal work, the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, validate the thesis that knowledge and spiritual experience are not two

distinct and separate entities but rather form one manifold. And it seems to me that in this sense, epistemology (the modes of knowledge) and ontology (the experience of self and being) are inextricably linked in a Bahá'í understanding. We should not lose sight of the fact that the *Iqán*, notwithstanding the fact that it is Bahá'u'lláh preeminent doctrinal work, also contains strong mystical elements and should be read jointly with *The Seven Valleys (Haft Vádi)* and *The Four Valleys (Cháhár Vádi)*, and for that matter *The Hidden Words (Kalimát-i-Maknúnih)* which also has its own distinctive mystical language.

To illustrate this root principle of the symbiosis of knowledge and experience which I am underscoring here, we find that the mysticism of the *Iqán* depicts the knowledge of God as a union of the soul with God which Bahá'u'lláh describes in an a transpersonal evocative language of spiritual passion, and through an exhortation to observe a spirituality of detachment, based on the practice of ideal spiritual virtues and discipline of spirit which will bring about the *hieros gamos* or the divine marriage of the soul with God. The sacred marriage of the soul with God in the form of reaching the celestial city of the Word of God,^[31] which is the great pilgrimage of all pilgrimages, is the end point of the "true seeker's" search at which certitude is everlastingly conferred. Bahá'u'lláh writes in the *Iqán*: "*Va (and) mojahedeen fi Allah (valiant in God) baad az enghetaae'(separation) az má savah (from all else but [Him]) chenán (in this way) beh án madineh owns girand (accustomed) keh ánee (moment) az án (from it) monfak nashavand'(monfak shodan'to separate) (owns gereftan'to be accustomed)*" "They that valiantly labour in quest of God's will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, will be so attached and wedded to that City that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable."^[32] Incidentally, Shoghi Effendi's translation techniques, as revealed in this verse, and as is true for the Guardian's renderings generally, indicate a stylised, poetical translation which is somewhat more elaborate and effusive than the simple and direct prose of the Persian.

Bahá'u'lláh's epistemology, when viewed strictly in the light of the encounter between the seeker and the Manifestation of God, is based on a radical rejection of worldly or acquired knowledge, the Sufi "veil of knowledge," so that the seeker may experience unimpeded the true knowledge of God, that Bahá'u'lláh equates, not with the ratiocinations and excogitations of the propositions of religion, but with the immediate and intuitive living *experience* of God, surging within the heart of that "true seeker" who chooses to love and to seek Him.

The perspective of symbiosis will greatly assist in overcoming the subject-object dichotomy that has plagued western thinkers for centuries and to help restore that unity of "heart and head" which will produce a more holistic understanding of spiritual anthropology. The heart (Ar. ' *qalb, fú'ád* ('inner heart)), as you know, Bahá'u'lláh has called "the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God."^[33] but it has, in Bahá'í theology, clear intellectual, percpective or understanding functions.

Bahá'u'lláh has, of course, put forth this same principle of symbiosis elsewhere. In the tablet of *Tajalliyát* (effulgences) He says: "True belief in God and recognition of Him cannot be complete save by observance of whatsoever hath been decreed by Him and set down in the Book by the Pen of Glory."^[34] Actually, I suspect that the older translation in the 1960 edition of *The Divine Art of Living* comes closer to the meaning of the original. It reads: "Faith in God, and the knowledge of Him, cannot be fully realized except through believing in all that hath proceeded from Him, and by practicing all that He hath commanded in the Book from the Supreme Pen."^[35] It is this word *practicing* that I want to underscore, for we may simply observe without practicing. In light of these considerations, one might present a modern equation of reality (*Al Haqq*) as a synthesis of theory and practice as follows: Theory (cognitive knowledge) + *praxis* (spirituality/mysticism) ' Reality.

This view of symbiosis should be a consolation rather than an alienation to those of scientific bent. For, the scientist of religion knows that only through the practical demonstration can the theoretical be proven. As perennial philosopher Aldous Huxley reminds us in his introduction to the *Bagavad Gita* in homely "barnyard" metaphors attributed to Buddha and Muhammad, the theologian whose metaphysics is self-unrealised can be compared to a herdsman of other men's cows (Buddha) and/or just an ass bearing a load of books (Muhammad).^[36] Purely theoretical approaches to the study of religion would appear to fall into the trap of `Abdu'l-Bahá's pointed critique of religion as "the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine."^[37] Also, Bahá'u'lláh's short but nonetheless telling phrase inextricably links the deed or *praxis* with knowledge: "An act, however infinitesimal, is, when viewed in the mirror of the knowledge of God, mightier than a mountain."^[38]

Correlating Bahá'í Mystical Theology to St. Augustine's Metaphysics of Inner Experience

According to the process of symbiosis that I have been explaining, spiritual experience always exists concurrently and co-dependently with forms of the knowledge of God. This correlation of mystical experience to theological knowledge is a basic point, not only as I hold, of Bahá'u'lláh's *Book of Certitude*, but also of St. Augustine's epistemology. Now I should say that I like Augustine's epistemology very much but I am less fond of his moral theology, such as his doctrine of original sin, which has been greatly coloured by his own struggles with sexuality. However, St. Augustine's theology was largely a "metaphysics of inner experience."^[39] The great mass of Augustine's writings which are topical rather than systematic are held together by the remarkable experiences of his life and his strong personal convictions which aim at all times for "the principle of the absolute and immediate certainty of consciousness"^[40] as expressed in his saying *In interiore Homine habitat veritas*, "truth inhabits the inner man."^[41] In this strong validation of inner experience, which

also defines the perspective of *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, Augustine is a disciple of both Origen and Plotinus.

In his search for knowledge, Augustine was preoccupied by the question of certitude and I draw your attention to the fact that the title of Bahá'u'lláh's preeminent doctrinal work contains this very word, *Iqán*. Augustine desired, not only to know, but he desired to know with certainty, that is beyond doubt, that what he knew was true. And truth for Augustine was by definition eternal. So the question of certitude as he raised it was: "How does the finite, changing human mind attain certain knowledge of eternal truths which rule and govern the mind and so transcend it."^[42] This, I might suggest, was one of Bahá'u'lláh's main preoccupations in unfolding to us the story of progressive revelation and the journey of the soul to reach the Divine Word, the Celestial City or the Bride of God in the *Iqán*.

Such observations about the attainment of certitude in acquiring the knowledge of God (theology) must derive also from the recognition that the quest for understanding of both epistemology and ontology must necessarily include the knowledge of self. And here I would define "self" as an infinitely diminished reflection of the *Nafs Illáhi* within the human soul, a lesser divine reflection of the "Self of God" which Juan Cole has plausibly defined as seeming "to refer to the totality of God's active attributes, of which the prophets and messengers are manifestations."^[43] The knowledge of self is both instrument and medium of both knowledge and experience, a medium for the correspondence of the outer forms of knowledge (the objective forms) with the inner self (the subjective forms) to be both processed and in a sense, possessed.

This *exist-ential* knowledge of self vehicles the knowledge of God primarily as an individual experience, something immediately apprehended by the soul, which in a kind of "peak experience,"^[44] and as the result of ethical discipline, ardent search and spiritual passion, breaks in on the soul in a way that Bahá'u'lláh has described in a remarkable epiphanic moment as "the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit"^[45] to the seeker, waking her entire being to a new, delightful, heretofore never experienced spirituality.

The Benefits of Mystical Theology for Bahá'í Scholasticism

David Tracy of the University of Chicago's divinity school and one of Christendom's preeminent theologians today, has outlined some of the benefits of mysticism, contemplation and spirituality to the performative aspects of theology which are instructive for all Bahá'í scholars. Tracy declares the present necessity of a much-needed collaboration between scholasticism and spirituality which is the

greater part of mysticism. For mysticism is the part but spirituality is the whole. Tracey says:

“I think that theology will be better off the more theologians attempt to recover a relationship to traditions of spirituality and thus undo the separation of theology and spirituality that developed after medieval scholasticism, which made a distinction between the two without separating them.”^[46]

I emphasize Tracy's point that the rift between theology and spirituality occurred in the *post* scholastic age. In medieval scholasticism, whether Christian or Islamic, they were one. I would suggest that the former practice of scholasticism comes very close to the idea of true Bahá'í scholarship, with a possible reserve on its love of disputation. I would also suggest that Bahá'í scholarship, which is modern day scholasticism, is far from being what has been called "dusty pedantry and irrelevant distinction making."^[47]

In an instructive 1998 cross-cultural and comparative religious study called *Scholasticism*, editor José Ignacio Cabezón points out 8 fruitful inter-religious characteristics of scholasticism which are central, not just to the study of religion, but to the history of the development of western thought itself.^[48] Cabezón points out that "Even the early Heidegger believed that the scholastic method in its true form represented a fresh perspective on the problems of philosophy, one that, concerned more the *actual doing* of metaphysics than with methodological speculation *about how to do it*, could be of value in dispelling what he considered the oblivion of being."^[49] So it would seem, then, the work of this generation of Bahá'í scholars has much greater import than perhaps they themselves realise, for the fruits of such labours are contributing, in a larger perspective, to the development of a whole new east-west philosophical/theological dialectic.

But to return to David Tracy, for him, the "crucial part" of a synthesis of the spiritual and theological dimensions would be a recovery of both the mystical and prophetic traditions.^[50] Tracy's comment should excite the imagination of any Bahá'í who has carefully read *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* and the *Kitáb-i-Iqán* for these are the *locus classicus* of Bahá'í works of the mystical and prophetic traditions respectively. David Tracy's interlocutor Thomas Levergood in the same article I refer to above, explains that the value of the recovery of mysticism for the theologian calls for, among other things, the virtue of detachment, that spiritual attribute to which Bahá'u'lláh has given absolute pre-eminence in the search for God. In the prologue to *The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'u'lláh declares: "No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth."^[51] Levergood names detachment as one of the multiple functions in the mystical search for truth:

The mystical tradition calls for disciplines of detachment, conversion, and self-examination so that the mystic-theologian has a kind of *grasping* of truth. In a sense, mysticism suggests a participatory model of knowledge and makes an important claim for considering transformation as a subjective condition of knowledge, something that modern thought has difficulty accounting for.^[52]

As one might expect from these statements, prayer still has a place in David Tracy's call for modern day theology to recover its spiritual traditions. He speaks of "a prayerful reading of the Scriptures of the church..."^[53] a statement which concords perfectly with a Bahá'í understanding of the reading of its own scriptures.

Tracey's homologue, also a Roman Catholic, is the great spiritual genius, the prolific Father Thomas Merton. As an aside, it is no coincidence that both men are of the Catholic faith since Catholicism, with its ancient tradition, has long recognized the intimate connections between theology and spirituality, between study and the activities of prayer and meditation. Merton makes the same point this way:

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality" are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical, but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and in spirituality. But the two belong together, just as body and soul belong together. Unless there are united, there is no fervor, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.^[54]

In the understanding of Bahá'í spirituality, there can be nothing more important than prayer. And prayer, by `Abdu'l-Bahá's definition, is inseparable from spirituality and hence mysticism. Notice the linking of the concepts of prayer and spirituality in this quotation from `Abdu'l-Bahá:

In all the worlds of existence there is nothing more important than prayer. Prayer confers spirituality on the heart. Spirituality is the greatest of God's gifts and life everlasting. It means turning to God.^[55]

The same point did not escape Shoghi Effendi's notice when he defined "the universal crisis affecting mankind" as being "essentially spiritual in its causes."^[56] And in that

seminal quotation you know so well, that bears repeating here, Shoghi Effendi says through his secretary:

For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer merely to accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality which he can acquire chiefly by means of prayer. The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide.^[57]

Bahá'u'lláh's Universe of the Valleys: Unattainable Spiritual Experience?

It is a commonplace observation that when Bahá'u'lláh wrote *The Seven Valleys (Haft Vádí)* and *The Four Valleys (Cháhár Vádí)*, He was describing unattainable spiritual experiences. This view, however, bears reconsideration. Although the macro-mystical world of the soul in its interactions with God depicted by Bahá'u'lláh may be beyond the psychology of the norm — and in some instances we clearly enter the realm of "blown minds" — it is not so in every case. We are apt to forget that within the universe He describes there are numerous micro spiritual worlds and states that the ordinary seeker, I might suggest, in his or her own inner world *has already experienced*. For otherwise, these works would be quite incomprehensible to any reader.

For, to argue rhetorically, who has not experienced both the joy and the pain that Bahá'u'lláh describes in The Valley of Love and The Valley of Contentment: "The steed of this Valley is pain; and if there be no pain this journey will never end."^[58] and "From sorrow he turneth to bliss, from anguish to joy."^[59] These alternating human emotions are universal. There are, moreover, other universal elements in Bahá'u'lláh's sacred narrative of the journey of the soul to God. These include the ardour of search, the tests and difficulties along the way, and the final happy reunification with the Beloved at journey's end, portrayed in Bahá'u'lláh's beautiful and moving adaptation in *The Seven Valleys (Haft Vádí)* of Rumi's story in the *Mathnaví* of the "The Unworthy Lover," the broken-hearted archtypical lover, Majnún, who is relentlessly pursued by the night watchman, until, after making good his escape by scaling a high wall, finds his beloved Laylí in a secret garden.^[60] This singular tale also firmly roots story in Bahá'í scripture and invites allegorical

interpretations of scripture. This story also raises a question since it takes place, not in the valley of love, as we might expect, but in the valley of knowledge.

If Bahá'u'lláh's mystical treatise did not have some elements of universality and accessibility, moreover, it would remain meaningless. It would be consequently self-defeating for the seeker to regard the universe of the valleys as completely unattainable, ideal spiritual experiences that are foreign to common mortals. For in the Arabic prologue to *The Seven Valleys* Bahá'u'lláh, not only affirms, but seems to expect, that the ultimate Sufi goal of self-evanescence (*faná*) and seeing God in everything can be won:

...to the end...that every man thereby win his way to the summit of realities, (*dharwat'al-haqá'iq*), until none shall contemplate anything whatsoever but that he shall see God therein. ^[61]

One may consequently conclude that Bahá'u'lláh, in writing *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys*, was not communicating unattainable spiritual experiences in a purely private, evocative symbolism, but was describing the experiences that the spiritualised soul could attain, or at the very least, strive for in the search to become one with the Creator. ^[62] For Shoghi Effendi states that *The Seven Valleys* "describes the seven stages which the soul of the seeker *must* needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence." ^[63] I emphasize the phrase "must needs", for it indicates a *sine qua non*, an absolute condition for the meeting of the soul with God. Further, the fact that Shoghi Effendi included this work in the first canon of Bahá'í writings to be translated into English indicates that the mystical genre is to be regarded as a categorical imperative of the language of revelation, along with the doctrinal and ethical categories established by the *Iqán* and *The Hidden Words (Kalimát-i-Maknúnih)* which also form three fundamental categories of the phenomenology of religion.

Love, that divine universal, as has often been remarked, is an ineffable mystery. But this sense of mystery is at the heart of religion and, according to Einstein, at the root of science. ^[64] Universal love, the love of God, is the *sine qua non* of finding God in Bahá'u'lláh's universe of the valleys. This love is open and available to everyone who seeks the Beloved. To the extent that we ardently seek this love, we are all mystics:

O My Brother! Until thou enter the Egypt of love, thou shalt never come to the Joseph of the Beauty of the Friend; and until, like Jacob, thou forsake thine outward eyes, thou shalt never open the eye of thine inward being; and until thou burn with the fire of love, thou shalt never commune with the Lover of Longing. ^[65]

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper for a correlation between mystical experience and the knowledge of God and have pointed out the great need, just one of many in the field of Bahá'í scholarship, to record, to study and to validate mystical experience. As a field of scholarly study, mysticism cannot be neglected, not only because it corresponds to one of the classical genres of Bahá'í scripture and the expression of one of the perennial forms of the divine life of the soul, but also because it is closely connected to the practice of Bahá'í spirituality through its chief components of prayer and meditation. Mystical experience and spirituality are intimately connected to the work of the scholar. Indeed they form part of that expression of worship that is Bahá'í scholarship itself. An authentic Bahá'í scholar cannot practice self-unrealised metaphysics. As for any Bahá'í, to be authentic and truly knowledgeable, the self of the Bahá'í scholar must be a reflection of the work under study. The scholar must read, as Bahá'u'lláh says, "the book of his own self (*kitáb-i-nafs*), rather than some treatise on rhetoric."^[66] Mystical experience should not be viewed by any Bahá'í as being an unattainable spiritual event but something that may result as a consequence of the grace of God and of the practice of spiritual discipline.

Notes

- [1] "Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today and so that they could *correlate* these to the Bahá'í teachings." (Quoted in a letter from the Universal House of Justice, 19 October, 1993). Italics not in Shoghi Effendi nor in note no. 2.
- [2] "It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and *to correlate* them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth (cited by the Universal House of Justice in a letter to an individual 19 October, 1993).
- [3] From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 21 October 1943 quoted in "The Importance of Deepening," p. 44.
- [4] From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 5 July, 1949, quoted in "The Importance of Deepening," p. 49.
- [5] On *praxis*, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 240-250.
- [6] See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).
- [7] *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, James Nisbet & Co. Ltd, Digswell Place, Welwyn, Herts. 1957, p. 14.
- [8] p. 176.
- [9] Plato, *The Republic*. [ref]

- [10] Zaynu'l-Muqarrabin, "the most eminent of the transcribers of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings", made a compilation of 107 "Questions and Answers" which contain answers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh to various questions which had been submitted to Him by believers. (Numbers 104-107 contain no questions.) The Universal House of Justice states that the "Questions and Answers" "constitutes an invaluable appendix to the *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*". (Introduction to the *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, p. 9)
- [11] This is the record of answers to questions put to `Abdu'l-Bahá by Laura Clifford Barney at `Akká, Palestine between the years 1904-1906 while `Abdu'l-Bahá was confined to that city by order of the Ottoman government, and restricted to very few visitors.
- [12] These two models can be explained in the following two succinct formulae: (1) T' Q + A (closed). The question is posed and answered. The truth is revealed by the correspondence of question and answer. This reveals a unit of truth or truth statement. (2) T' OQ (open). The question is unanswered. Almost all the questions and answers in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and *Some Answered Questions* are of type (1).
- [13] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 317.
- [14] *Ibid.*
- [15] See "The Psychology of Mysticism and its Relationship to the Bahá'í Faith," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, vol 2, no.4 (March, 1984), pp. 4-21.
- [16] p. 323.
- [17] *Varieties*, pp. 76-108. Staying within a few examples of the Christian tradition, that religion of delight is reflected in St. John of the Cross when he says that the immense desert of the soul is "delicious." (313) Saint Teresa speaks of an "unspeakable happiness" (316) and Saint Ignatius in a language reminiscent of the Sufi of "intoxicating consolations." (317) The father of Christian mysticism, Dionysius the Areopagite, speaks everywhere in superlatives in his cataphatic language of the *via negativa*. God is *super* everything. (319) Jakob Böhme (Jacob Boehme) writes of the "Primal Love" of God as "that only good." (320)
- [18] St. John of the Cross [source]
- [19] Notwithstanding the validity of mystical experience according to Bahá'í scripture and faith practice, Shoghi Effendi has signalled certain cautions in this regard. The possibility of mystical experience is clearly acknowledged in the Bahá'í Faith, although Shoghi Effendi states that true mystical experiences are "very rare." He indicates that there is a danger in self-generated, presumably imaginary mystical experience, brought on more likely than not by the inordinate desire to have one. According to Shoghi Effendi, God rather than self, would be the author of the "deeply spiritual experience." If we view dreams as a dimension of mysticism, the Bahá'í writings acknowledge the importance of dreams for the imparting of truth, guidance, and self-understanding.

Shoghi Effendi writes, however, that dreams are more or less conditioned by both the preoccupations and the purity of the mind of the dreamer. Regarding visions, Shoghi Effendi maintained that visions were not confined to the prophets alone, but that is difficult to distinguish between imaginations and true visions. However, the possibility of the true vision is clearly acknowledged for pure and receptive souls. Whatever "revelations" an individual may have, however, cannot be construed as constituting infallible guidance which is reserved for the prophets alone. Following `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi warned that Bahá'ís are not to tamper with psychic phenomena. Today such psychic phenomena would be channeling, seances, telekenesis or astral travelling. There may be some beneficial uses to clairvoyance such as its application to police work in the search for missing persons and criminals, but further research is needed here. The risk of concentrating excessively on the development of psychic faculties is that we might weaken the development of purely spiritual virtues by neglect. (See *Lights of Guidance*, nos. 1737 (psychic phenomena), 1739 (dreams and visions), 1740 (visions), 1741 (divine revelation and personal experiences), 1742 (mystical experiences), 1743 (individual revelations). (*Lights of Guidance*))

- [20] *Varieties*, p. 328.

- [21] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 169-70, quoted by Jalil Mahmoudi in "Irfán, Gnosis, or Mystical Knowledge," *World Order*, Summer 1973, p. 10.
- [22] *Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 83.
- [23] See, for example, Rona M. Freeman's "The Figure in the Red Robe," Sally Eiler's "A Spiritual Crown," Violet Dutov Tichenor's "Thrill of Recognition," Thomas Lysaght's "In the Clouds of Glory," especially Margot Johnson's "Seasons of the Soul" and Elaine Shevin's "In Desperation," as well as Randie Gottlieb's "Mind and Heart." If one adds the dream and prayer as signs of mystical experience, other stories apply.
- [24] *God Passes By*, p. 140.
- [25] *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh*, No. XXXIII, p. 42.
- [26] *Varieties*, p. 324.
- [27] *Varieties*, p. 325.
- [28] *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1742, pp. 515-516.
- [29] *The Psychology of Religion*. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press (1916), p. 280.
- [30] *Ibid*, p. 280.
- [31] *Iqán*, pp. 198-199.
- [32] *Iqán*, pp. 198-199.
- [33] Bahá'u'lláh, the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 192.
- [34] *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 50.
- [35] p. 52.
- [36] Aldous Huxley, introduction to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, p. 15.
- [37] `Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Wherefore it is incumbent upon all Bahá'í to ponder this very delicate and vital matter in their hearts, that, unlike other religions, they may not content themselves with the noise, the clamor, the hollowness of religious doctrine. Nay, rather, they should exemplify in every aspect of their lives those attributes and virtues that are born of God and should arise to distinguish themselves by their goodly behavior." *The Divine Art of Living*, p. 25 (1960 edition) .
- [38] *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 65.
- [39] Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, p. 276.
- [40] *Ibid*.
- [41] *Ibid*, n. 2.
- [42] Augustine's question formulated by Frederick Copleston in *History of Philosophy*. vol. 2, "Mediaeval Philosophy," p. 67.
- [43] *The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings*, p. 18.
- [44] Maslow.
- [45] *Iqán*, p. 196.
- [46] "Conversation with David Tracy," *Cross Currents. The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life*, vol. 4, no. 3, Fall 1994, p. 293, hereafter "Conversation."
- [47] From Laurie L. Patton's foreword to *Scholasticism. Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. By José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. viii.

- [48] These eight characteristics are: (1) A strong sense of tradition (2) A concern with language (3) Proliferativity: the tendency to textual and analytical inclusiveness rather than exclusivity (4) Completeness and compactness.[a view of totality] (5) The belief that the universe is basically intelligible (6) Systematics: order in exposition (7) Rationalism (8) Self-reflexivity; i.e., the development of "first-order" exegesis followed up by "second-order" hermeneutics.
- [49] *Scholasticism. Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. By José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), Introduction, p. 3.
- [50] Todd Breyfogle's attribution in "Conversation," p. 294.
- [51] The *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 4.
- [52] "Conversation," p. 294.
- [53] "Conversation," p. 300.
- [54] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1972), pp. 254-255. Copyright 1961, Abbey of Gethsemani.
- [55] `Abdu'l-Bahá in *Star of the West* XIV, p. 165.
- [56] See source n. [...]
- [57] Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer in *Bahá'í News*, no. 102, August, 1936, p. 3.
- [58] *The Seven Valleys*, p. 8.
- [59] *The Seven Valleys*, p. 29.
- [60] See my allegorical interpretation of this story in "The Possibilities of Existential Theism for Bahá'í Theology" in *Revisoning the Sacred. New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*, pp. 205-207. By a publishing glitch, this article was incorrectly named "Promises to Keep: Thoughts on an Emerging Bahá'í Theology" in the Table of Contents but the article itself bears the correct title. Cf. the *Mathnaví*, vol. 2, pp. 275-76, corresponding to the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth *Daftar*. The story is found *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, pp. 13-14.
- [61] *The Seven Valleys*, pp. 1-2. To "win his way" suggests other spiritual attributes: courage, patience, steadfastness, struggle and endurance.
- [62] In Bahá'í parlance, becoming "one with the Creator" does not in any sense mean that the soul takes on the essence of divinity or shares in that divine essence. It refers to an experience of unity without there being identity of essence.
- [63] *God Passes By*, p. 140.
- [64] "His [the scientist's] religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. This feeling is the guiding principle of his life and work, in so far as he succeeds in keeping himself from the shackles of selfish desire. It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages." (Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, p. 50).
- [65] *The Seven Valleys*, 9.
- [66] *The Four Valleys*, p. 48.