

# The Creative Word and the Meaning of Unity

## An annotated survey of Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawḥ-i-Ittihád (Tablet of Unity)*

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The principle of unity (Per./Ar. *ittihád*), besides occupying a central position among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, is perhaps the most widely explored and debated subject in the Bahá'í Faith. With an increasing global realization of its importance in the collective life of humanity, many people are striving to understand how Bahá'u'lláh's vision of unity can resuscitate the declining and enervated social structure of our planet. In the *Lawḥ-i-Ittihád (Tablet of Unity)*, written during the period of His banishment to 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh elucidates the subject of unity and sheds light on its necessity in relation to such topics as "religion" (*dín*), "speech" (*qawl*), "actions" (*a'mál*), "rank or station" (*maqám*), "people" (*nufús*), and "earthly possessions" (*amwál*). This article examines the contents of the *Lawḥ-i-Ittihád* in an exploratory fashion with the aid of the author's provisional English translation from the earliest Persian/Arabic published source.<sup>1</sup>

The *Lawḥ-i-Ittihád* or the *Tablet of Unity* was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh some time after 1879 in response to a letter from one of His followers on the topic of unity (*ittihád*). The date of its composition is not certain, but we know the person to whom the Tablet was addressed, as well as the period during which it was penned. In his celebrated chronicle, *Shaykh Kázim-i-Samandar*, a prominent early Bahá'í of Qazvín, identifies Siyyid Asadu'lláh Báqiroff as the one who wrote to Bahá'u'lláh seeking enlightenment on the notion of *ittihád* and for whom this Tablet was revealed.<sup>2</sup> Siyyid Asadu'lláh was one of five devoted Bahá'í brothers from the city of Rasht, in northern Iran, whom Bahá'u'lláh entitled *Sádát-i-Khamsih* (the Five Siyyids).<sup>3</sup>

Numerous passages among Bahá'u'lláh's published and widely circulated writings refer to or offer directives on the principle of unity. None, however, delve as thoroughly as the *Lawḥ-i-Ittihád* in the myriad dimensions of unity by elucidating its application in the context of the social life of humanity.

The Tablet begins with an invocation followed by a few lines in which Bahá'u'lláh confers His blessing upon Siyyid Asadu'lláh and his brothers for their recognition of His Cause:

He is God, exalted is He, the Lord of wisdom and utterance. The letter of one of the Sádát, they who have set themselves towards God and having heard the Call have answered their Lord, the All-Loving, the Most Generous, was presented before this Wronged One. All are remembered before the scene of His transcendent glory. We beseech the one true God to confirm them in that which will bring about their perpetual remembrance.<sup>4</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh then addresses the recipient of the Tablet, Siyyid Asadu'lláh, in these words:

Thou hast asked regarding [the concept of] unity. Unity in the first place is unity in religion (*ittihád dar dín*), and throughout the centuries and ages this unity has always been the instrument for the triumph of the Cause of God. Assemblage of people (*ijtimá'*) is the mystic sword of God. For instance, if at the present time a government realizeth that the majority of its citizens have rent the veil asunder and directed themselves toward the Horizon of God's Revelation [i.e., Bahá'u'lláh] it would be compelled to take note and listen. And whosoever hearkeneth [in this Day to the Call of the Almighty] hath attained to the knowledge of the one true God (*'irfán-i-ḥaq*), exalted be His glory, but those who are truly far from God's mercy rightfully deserve His vengeance and fury. Those people are at all times deprived and removed [from God's grace].<sup>5</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh continues by introducing another aspect of unity. He writes:

Another kind of unity is unity in speech (*ittihád dar qawl*) which is most essential. Consider, for instance, if two loved ones of God [i.e., Bahá'ís] enter a land and speak in contradiction on the same subject. They would, as a result, create dissension and would deprive themselves and those who hear them from the bounty of unity which hath been revealed through the Pen of the Lord of creation. Human utterance (*bayán*) hath ever been and will continue to be the champion [of the Cause] of the one true God. In this Most Great Revelation, however, goodly deeds and upright character are the hosts that are rendering the one true God victorious.<sup>6</sup>

Human utterance, if delivered in the right measure, is the mercy of God, but if it exceedeth that measure it will become the cause and instrument of destruction.<sup>7</sup> In Our Tablets<sup>8</sup> We have admonished everyone to such utterances that resemble in nature and have the effect of milk that it may nourish the children of the world, and thereby help them attain to maturity. Human utterance at any level can appear in a particular form and have a particular effect and it can diffuse from itself the fragrance of benevolence or that of mischief.<sup>9</sup>

After His exposition on the unity of speech Bahá'u'lláh introduces another aspect of unity. He states: "On another level that which is intended by unity is unity of actions (*ittihád-i-a'mál*)"<sup>10</sup>, and adds that any incongruity in this will lead to conflict. Elaborating on this theme, Bahá'u'lláh writes that during His banishment from Baghdad to Edirne one day He stopped at a mosque on the way and was surprised to see that while everyone was observing the *Ṣalát* (the daily Muslim obligatory prayer) the manner in which they performed the prayer ritual was dramatically inconsistent to one another! Some prayed with their arms folded in front of them while others with their arms extended by their sides. Some, in part of the common invocation, recited one phrase while another group chanted a different phrase altogether. And still others were seen dancing, claiming that they were communing with God! Recounting, with a sense of outrage, at the apparent foolishness of the crowd at the mosque, Bahá'u'lláh exclaims: "God forbid! the one true God is completely sanctified and removed from such methods of worship."<sup>11</sup> He

adds that if the people of Islam had truly acted upon that which the Pen of the Merciful had revealed, the entire world would have accepted Islam. But, differences in actions (*ikhtiláf-i-a'mál*) created differences in the Cause which in turn led to the weakening of the Religion<sup>12</sup>.

Bahá'u'lláh further states that if Islam is viewed as a sea, its followers have opened up unnumbered rivers from this sea which has led to “sapping the strength of God’s Religion amongst the people.”<sup>13</sup> He adds that even until now no one from the rank of a king to an ordinary citizen has discovered the cause of its decline, nor has anyone been able to understand how Islam can regain its past glory. Yet, the sectarian “rivers” continue to drain the sea of the Cause of Muhammad. “One river is Shí'a, one river is Sunní,” writes Bahá'u'lláh. “One river is Shaykhí, one river is Sháh Ni'matu'lláhí, one river is Naqshbandí, one river is Malámatí, one river is Jalálí, one river is Rafá'í, one river is Kharábátí.” At the end of the passage Bahá'u'lláh exclaims: “If you try to count all the ways to Hell you'll find them to be countless!”<sup>14</sup>

“Hence,” concludes Bahá'u'lláh, “these differences in actions have shaken the foundation of the Cause of God.” Bahá'u'lláh then turns His attention to those followers of the Báb who had rejected His Claim and addresses them in these words:

O people of Bayán! Harken to the Call of this Wronged One and suffer not yourselves to the plight of the followers of the previous religions. He, verily, revealeth the evidence and guideth the way. Beware lest ye create any deviation in what hath been revealed from the heaven of the Will of your Lord, the Almighty, the Most Powerful. . . . Cleanse and purify your hearts with the life-giving waters that stream forth from the Pen of the All-Merciful, and render the Cause victorious through the hosts of goodly deeds, upright character and heavenly words. This, verily, is the counsel of the one true God, exalted be His glory, in the Tablets which have been revealed and continue to emanate from the Pen of the Most High.<sup>15</sup>

After addressing the “people of Bayán”, Bahá'u'lláh resumes His commentary on other implications of unity. He writes: “There is also the unity of station [or rank] (*ittihád-i-maqám*),” and adds: “it is this [principle] that provides the means for the rise and ennoblement of the Cause amongst the people.”<sup>16</sup> Bahá'u'lláh goes on:

Ever since claims to superiority and ascendancy came into being, the world has been corrupted and is seen in ruins. Those who have quaffed from the ocean of the Utterance of the All-Merciful, and are gazing upon the Supreme Horizon [i.e., Bahá'u'lláh] must see themselves on one plane (*suq'*) and occupying one station (*maqám*).<sup>17</sup> If these words are accepted and become firmly established through God’s power and might, the world will truly become the most effulgent paradise. It is true that man’s station is lofty, for it is recorded in all the verses of the one true God. However, to consider oneself more learned, more eminent, more virtuous, more God-fearing, and more exalted than others is, indeed, a most grievous error. Blessed are those who have adorned themselves with the ornament of this unity and have attained to that which is with God. . . . Look at the divines of Persia. If they had not considered themselves above and more exalted than the people, their

abject followers would not have busied themselves with cursing and reviling the Desire of the world. . . . The flame of pride and self-righteousness hath consumed them all.<sup>18</sup>

After lamenting over the wilful ignorance of the Persian clergy, Bahá'u'lláh states that: “If the Pen of the Most High desirest it is capable of delineating in full all the degrees of unity as appeareth in all things and in every issue. To do this, however, would preoccupy the Pen for years.”<sup>19</sup>

The next unity which Bahá'u'lláh sets forth is the unity of people and earthly possessions (*ittihád-i-nufús va amvál*). “With this,” He writes, “We shall conclude Our exposition on the subject of unity.” “This unity,” Bahá'u'lláh states, “is, indeed, the unity that is the source of cheer and joy and exultation. . . . and from it the attribute of ‘charitable giving’<sup>20</sup> (*múvását*) is made manifest.” He goes on to say that in the holy books of the past and those of the future dispensations this altruistic quality has been and will continue to be greatly loved. Bahá'u'lláh warns, however, that this act of “charitable giving” is only limited to “earthly possession” (*mál*) and nothing more.<sup>21</sup> He then quotes this passage from the *Qur’án*: “. . . and preferring others above themselves, even though poverty be their portion. And whoso is guarded against the avarice of his own soul, those—they are the ‘ones with whom it shall be well.’”<sup>22</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh then states that this attribute [i.e., *múvását*] ranks above “equality” (*musávát*). He defines equality as when a person expends generously to his fellow men the material riches that God has bestowed upon him. He writes that this act is very meritorious for it is the sharing of God’s bounty. But the acts of those who prefer others over themselves is even nobler, for in this state the person is sacrificing his own material needs for the needs of others.<sup>23</sup> Again, we must remember that Bahá'u'lláh insists that the act of “charitable giving” (*múvását*) is only confined to material possessions. In fact, in another Tablet<sup>24</sup>, in which He expounds on the meaning of *múvását*, Bahá'u'lláh declares that the act of anyone who exceeds this limitation is considered before God only the result of the prompting of his over-indulgent self and passion.

Continuing His explication of the “unity of people”, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

The purpose for the unity of people is the love of God and the Word of God, and that everyone would come together for His sake and put their reliance completely in Him. Every possessor of vision and insight will readily concur with that which hath streamed from the Pen of the Most High.<sup>25</sup>

He then concludes His commentary on *ittihád* by adding that:

All the aforementioned unities are, indeed, an army of the Army of God, a party of the Party of God, and a cause of the Cause of God. The unity of people (*ittihád-i-nufús*), however, from the beginning of creation till now, hath been and continueth to be the champion and the helper of the one true God. By this is meant the unity that leadeth to the establishment of the Cause of God and His Faith. At this level no unity surpasseth this rank.<sup>26</sup>

Having thus concluded His remarks on unity, Bahá'u'lláh continues by addressing His faithful followers in these words:

At this juncture the Pen of Glory counselleth His loved ones, one and all, to unity and concord. . . , and also to wisdom (*ḥikmat*). For some of the friends of God have failed to observe wisdom, and having been unheedful of its significance have provoked the clamour of the enemy to be raised in a number of lands. Give ear to the Call of this Wronged One, O people, and put in deeds that which hath been revealed in the Tablets. Speak not unless ye obtain a hearing. And until ye observe a pure and sanctified ground do not entrust the seed of wisdom (*bazr-i-ḥikmat*) to it. The Word of God is offered only when both the eye and the ear, and also the ground [of one's being] is ready to receive it. Some have uttered, at various occasions, that from which harm reverts back to the Root of the Tree of the Cause (*aṣl-i-sidrih*). Say: Fear God, O people, and be not of them who are accounted among the oppressors. Lead a chaste and godly life and be not of them who are accounted among the foolish.

The barren shoreline (*ard-i-jazr*) is not worthy of plantation, nor a misbelieving ear (*sam'-i-shirk*) worthy of hearing the Word of Oneness (*kalamiy-i-tawḥíd*). O people of God! There hath streamed from the Pen of the Most High that which is, truly, the cause and purpose of life for the entire world! Everyone must, for the love of God, ponder in their hearts God's Unity (*tawḥíd-i-iláhi*), lest they become like the people of the previous Faith who spoke the outer meaning but were completely deprived of the inner meaning. They were servants of names and keepers of idols (*ákifín-i-asnám*), yet they considered themselves among the people of unity and certitude (*ahl-i-tawḥíd va yaqín*). However, the one true God exposed what was hidden of their doings. On the Day of Return (*yúm-i-ma'ád*) the true side of their ascendancy, rank and godliness became clear and evident to the whole world.<sup>27</sup>

In the closing lines of the *Lawḥ-i-Ittiḥád* Bahá'u'lláh addresses Siyyid Asadu'lláh Báqiroff in these words: "O My Name! Greet the friends of God on behalf of this Wronged One and admonish them to that which God hath counselled them in His Scriptures and Tablets. . . . He is, verily, powerful over what He willeth, and in His grasp are the reins of all things. There is no God but Him, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The source text for all the translated passages in this article is *Ad'yyih-i-Hadrat-i-Mahbúb (Prayers of the Exalted Beloved)*, pp. 388-406. This very popular collection of Bahá'u'lláh's devotional writings was originally compiled by Faraju'lláh Dhakí al-Kurdí with the apparent approval of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and printed in Egypt on 14 Muḥarram 1339 A.H. (29 September 1920). The most recent reprint of this edition was made in 1980 by Bahá'í-Verlag Hofheim-Langenhain, Germany.

<sup>2</sup> *Tárikh-i-Samandar*, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the other four Báqiroff brothers were: Siyyid Ridá, Siyyid Naṣru'lláh, Siyyid Maḥmúd, and Siyyid Mír 'Alí Naqí. The five brothers apparently came to accept the Faith sometime in about 1296 A.H. (circa 1879) through the efforts of the Bahá'í poet and teacher Áqá 'Alí-Ashraf-i-Láhijání, who is also known by his sobriquet 'Andalíb (the Nightingale). For more details on the life and services of these five Bahá'í brothers and their descendants see R. Mehrábkhání's *Khánidán-i-Sádát-i-Khams*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ad'yyih*, p. 388.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 388-89.

<sup>6</sup> In the opening lines of *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih (Words of Paradise)* Bahá'u'lláh writes: "It behoveth the people of Bahá to render the Lord victorious through the power of their utterance and to admonish the people by their goodly deeds and character, inasmuch as deeds exert greater influence than words." (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 57).

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in His *Tablets* Bahá'u'lláh has commented extensively on the subject of "human utterance". In the *Lawḥ-i-Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, addressed to the erudite Áqá Mullá Muhammad-i-Qá'iní known as Nabíl-i-Akbar, Bahá'u'lláh states: "Say: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets." (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143). Bahá'u'lláh reiterates this exact passage in the *Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd (Tablet of Maqṣúd)* and the *Lawḥ-i-Siyyid Mihdí-i-Dahají (Tablet to Siyyid Mihdí-i-Dahají)* [*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 172, and p. 198]. In the *Lawḥ-i-Siyyid Mihdí Dahají* Bahá'u'lláh elucidates this theme further. He writes: "Utterance must needs possess penetrating power. For if bereft of this quality it would fail to exert influence. And this penetrating influence dependeth on the spirit being pure and the heart stainless. Likewise it needeth moderation, without which the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would manifest opposition from the very outset. And moderation will be obtained by blending utterance with the tokens of divine wisdom which are recorded in the sacred Books and Tablets. Thus when the essence of one's utterance is endowed with these two requisites it will prove highly effective and will be the prime factor in transforming the souls of men. This is the station of supreme victory and celestial dominion. Whoso attaineth thereto is invested with the power to teach the Cause of God and to prevail over the hearts and minds of men." (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 198-99).

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<sup>8</sup> One of these Tablets is *Lawh-i-Maqṣūd* in which Bahá'u'lláh writes: “Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. And likewise He saith: One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison. It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befiteth man’s station.” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 172-73).

<sup>9</sup> *Ad'ityih*, pp. 389-91.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 391.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 392.

<sup>12</sup> In a Tablet addressed to a group of believers and partially translated by Shoghi Effendi in the *Gleanings*, Bahá'u'lláh, while deploring the plight of Islam, points out the cause of its degeneration. He writes: “Behold, O Muḥammad, how the sayings and doings of the followers of Shí'ih Islám have dulled the joy and fervour of its early days, and tarnished the pristine brilliancy of its light. In its primitive days, whilst they still adhered to the precepts associated with the name of their Prophet, the Lord of mankind, their career was marked by an unbroken chain of victories and triumphs. As they gradually strayed from the path of their Ideal Leader and Master, as they turned away from the Light of God and corrupted the principle of His Divine unity, and as they increasingly centered their attention upon them who were only the revealers of the potency of His Word, their power was turned into weakness, their glory into shame, their courage into fear. Thou dost witness to what a pass they have come.” (*Gleanings*, p. 69).

<sup>13</sup> *Ad'ityih*, p. 393.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393-94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 394-95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 396.

<sup>17</sup> This statement of Bahá'u'lláh should not be misconstrued as a denunciation of having regards for individual distinction and higher accomplishment. In fact, in His Writings Bahá'u'lláh elevates the rank of some of His followers for their special measure of devotion and service to His Cause, and bids the other believers to turn to them for enlightenment, and to treat them with respect and deference. What Bahá'u'lláh condemns is boastful elevation of one person, who is perhaps in a position of distinction, over another for the purpose of personal gain and power. A fine example of this can be found in Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-u-'Ahdí* (His Will and Testament) where He writes: “It is enjoined upon everyone to manifest love towards the Aghsán [the Branches—a reference to Bahá'u'lláh's own male descendants], but God hath not granted them any right to the property of others.” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 222).

<sup>18</sup> *Ad'ityih*, pp. 396-97.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 398.

<sup>20</sup> The word *muvását* here translated as “charitable giving” is a rather complex and difficult word to translate into English. According to the Persian Lexicon *Farhang-i-Fársí-i-'Amíd* it is defined as: “Helping or assisting others through material means.” Bahá'u'lláh explains the true meaning of *muvását* in one of His Tablets (see footnote 24 below). Briefly, it means giving material assistance to others sacrificially.

<sup>21</sup> *Ad'ityih*, pp. 399.

<sup>22</sup> The Qur'ánic passage quoted by Bahá'u'lláh is from the sura 59, verse 9 with the exception of the

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last phrase. In the *Qur'án* the verse ends with the word “*al-muflihún*”, translated by A.J. Arberry as the “prosperers”, where as Bahá'u'lláh instead uses the phrase “*al-fá'azún*” to end the verse. The word “*al-fá'azún*” has been translated by Shoghi Effendi (*Gleanings* 46:5) as the “ones with whom it shall be well.”

<sup>23</sup> *Ad'íyyih*, pp. 399-400.

<sup>24</sup> *Daryáy-i-Dánish*, pp. 145-46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ad'íyyih*, p. 401.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 401-02.

<sup>27</sup> *Ad'íyyih*, p. 402-05.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 405-06.