

Will, Knowledge, and Love as Explained in Bahá'u'lláh's Four Valleys

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Abstract

This article intends to explore some of the seemingly abstruse concepts expounded by Bahá'u'lláh in "The Four Valleys." The first three Valleys are described as three aspects of the spiritual path to be trod by any human being, so that he/she may acquire knowledge of God, as realization of the self, through the use of his/her capacities of willing, knowing, and loving respectively. The fourth Valley is interpreted as describing the lofty and unattainable condition of the Manifestations of God, and as such, as offering a hint of the glory of the goal of perfection towards which human beings should strive, albeit assured that such a perfection will never be theirs.

Résumé

L'auteur de cet article cherche à explorer quelques-uns des concepts plutôt abstrus exposés par Bahá'u'lláh dans «Les Quatre vallées». L'article décrit les trois premières vallées comme étant trois aspects du cheminement spirituel que tout être humain doit faire pour parvenir à la connaissance de Dieu, alors vu comme la réalisation du soi par l'utilisation des capacités humaines que sont la volonté, la connaissance et l'amour. La quatrième vallée est interprétée comme étant une description de la condition élevée et inatteignable propre aux Manifestations de Dieu et, à ce titre, elle fournit un indice de la glorieuse nature de la perfection à laquelle devraient tendre les êtres humains, tout en sachant que jamais ils ne sauront atteindre pareille perfection.

Resumen

Este escrito propone hacer exploración de conceptos al parecer recónditos expuestos por Bahá'u'lláh en "Los Cuatro Valles". Los primeros tres Valles se perciben como tres aspectos del sendero espiritual que deberá ser caminado por el ser humano, de tal manera que el o ella pueda adquirir conocimiento de Dios, al conocerse a sí mismo mediante el ejercicio de sus facultades de empeño decisivo, disposición de conocer, y voluntad de amar, respectivamente. El Cuarto Valle se interpreta como una relación referente a la condición encumbrada e inalcanzable de las Manifestaciones de Dios, y que, dado lo anterior; vislumbra la gloria de la meta de perfección hacia la cual los seres humanos deberían esforzarse, asegurados al mismo tiempo que ese nivel de perfección nunca lo poseerán.

When Mírzá Husayn-'Alí from Núr, known as Bahá'u'lláh, composed his short but profound mystical treatises "The Seven Valleys" and "The Four Valleys," he was living in Baghdad where he had been exiled in 1853 by Násiri'd-Dín Sháh who feared him because of the spiritual ascendancy Bahá'u'lláh had been gaining throughout the Shah's empire. In the early years of his exile, Bahá'u'lláh had retired to Mount Sar-Galú in Kurdistan, where he lived in seclusion for two years (from 10 April 1854 to 19 March 1856). During that period, while leading the life of a *darvish*, he was in contact with eminent Sufi leaders, with whom he weaved an intense dialogue upon themes of interest for their School, thus becoming renowned as a sage.

His advice was sought by spiritual seekers. His answers to their questions were mostly verbal but sometimes took a written form. Among these written answers are the two epistles entitled "The Seven Valleys" and "The Four Valleys." The former, addressed to Shayikh Muhyi'd-Dín, judge of Kháníqayn,¹ is a real treatise, which "may well be regarded as His greatest mystical composition..." (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 140). The latter, a treatise of lesser dimension and importance, is a written answer to the learned Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Rahmán-i-Karkúfi the head of the mystic Khálidíyyih confraternity of Kurdistan.

These letters, written in the late 1850s and addressed to two different Sufi leaders of that time, are deliberately conceived in a ciphered language that, albeit suited to their addressees, may prove difficult for anyone unfamiliar with themes and idioms typical of that mysticism. This paper intends to explore some of the seemingly abstruse concepts expounded by Bahá'u'lláh in "The Four Valleys."²

Bahá'u'lláh announces his intention of writing a treatise on the stages of the heart at the very end of "The Seven Valleys," which he presents as a description of "the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence" (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 140). Whoever has entered into the seventh Valley, the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness, has certainly reached a very important

turning point in his/her spiritual life. That seeker has begun to learn how to forget limited personal self, how to concentrate human capacities on the Self of God, the divine Manifestation on earth, and how to submit personal will to the Will of God, as expressed by the Manifestation, through wholehearted adherence to God's laws.

And yet Bahá'u'lláh says that although this Valley is reckoned by them "who soar in the heaven of singleness and reach to the sea of the Absolute... as the furthestmost state of mystic knowers (*'arifán*), and the farthest homeland of the lovers (*'ashiqán*)," nevertheless it is just "the first gate of the heart's citadel, that is, man's first entrance to the city of the heart... (*madíniy-i-qalb*)" (*Valleys* 41). If the inner meanings of the word heart (Arabic: *qalb*; Persian: *dil*) are considered,³ this statement will become clearer: submission to the Manifestation of God through a strict adherence to divine laws is the indispensable prerequisite for anyone who wants to start exploring the mysterious expanses of his/her own heart, the seat of the inner Self.

Bahá'u'lláh goes on to announce that "the heart is endowed with four stages (*chihar-i-rutbih*)" and promises to describe them, "should a kindred soul be found" (*Valleys* 41). "The Four Valleys" is just this promised description.

The epistle begins with an exquisitely flourished prologue, which is not a mere homage to the classical Persian epistolary style. It also conveys at least two important spiritual concepts. The first one is that "faithfulness is a duty on those who follow the mystic way... [and] the true guide to His Holy Presence" (*Valleys* 48). "Faithfulness" translates the Arabic *istiqámat*, which conveys also the idea of perseverance. It also has the same root as the Arabic word *istaqámuwá*, mentioned in the quranic verse quoted immediately after, and translated as "those... who go straight to Him..." (*Valleys* 48). A similar idea is also expressed in other words in the Valley of Search: "...if he [the wayfarer] strive for a hundred thousand years and yet fail to behold the beauty of the Friend, he should not falter" (*Valleys* 5). The second concept is that "it is contrary to the usage of the wise to express My regard anew..." (*Valleys* 48). A similar concept is also expressed in *The Hidden Worlds*: "The wise are they that speak not unless they obtain a hearing, even as the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his cup till he findeth a seeker, and the lover who crieth not out from the depths of his heart until he gazeth upon the beauty of his beloved" (34–35).

At the end of his prologue, Bahá'u'lláh abruptly introduces his main theme: "Those who progress in mystic wayfaring (*samavát-i-sulúk*) are of four kinds (*chihar táyifih*)" (*Valleys* 49). He presents them as wanderers who traverse four different Valleys, described as spiritual stations (*maqám*, *rutbih*). In each of these Valleys he describes "grades" (*martibat*) and "qualities" (*alámat*), as though implying that in each Valley the mystic wayfarer will continuously and gradually move towards his/her intended goal.

The travelers are called by different names in each of the Valleys: "travelers" (*sálikán*) in the First and in the Second, "loving seekers" (*'ashiqán*, literally: lovers) in the Third, and "mystic knowers" (*'arifán*) in the Fourth.⁴ They differ from each other because they have chosen different spiritual goals. Bahá'u'lláh describes each of these goals through a divine attribute: "the goal of the Intended One" (*ka'biy-i-maqsúd*), "the dwelling of the Praiseworthy One" (*hujrihy-i-mahmúd*), "the precincts of the Attracting One" (*bayt-i-majdhúb*), and "the beauty (the beauteous countenance) of the Beloved" (*tal'at-i-mahbúb*), in each of the four Valleys respectively.

In reality these goals are but one and the same: God, as manifested in four of God's infinite attributes. But for the wayfarers, their aiming at different attributes of God implies different attitudes. In fact each of these stations "appertaineth" to a different spiritual reality: "the self" (*nafs*) or more exactly "the Self of God" (*nafsu'lláh*), "the primal reason" (*'aql-i-kullí rabbáni*) and "the beauty of love" (*tal'at-i-'ishq*) in the first three Valleys, "the apex of consciousness" (*'arsh-i-faw'ád*) and the secret of divine guidance" (*sirr-i-rashad*) in the fourth. Apart from the fourth Valley, which seems precluded to any human being, the others seem not to be mutually exclusive.

If we reflect on the meanings of these spiritual realities, we may find a possible key to understanding at least partially the meaning of each Valley. The purpose of human life is to know God. To know God means to know God's Manifestation. To know God's Manifestation implies being willing and able to express, in the form of spiritual ideas, feelings, words, and deeds, the inner reality of one's true self, through a faithful adherence to God's laws. Therefore these three Valleys may be seen as three aspects of the spiritual path to be trod by any human being, so that he/she may acquire knowledge of God, as realization of the self. In each Valley a different instrument is described through which the object of the spiritual quest may be attained. The first Valley, which is the station of the "self," may be viewed as the spiritual path wherein knowledge of God is being sought through a correct use of will. The second Valley, which is the station of the "primal reason," may be viewed as the spiritual path wherein knowledge of God is being sought through a correct use of the capacity of knowing. The third Valley, which is the station of the "beauty of love," may be viewed as the spiritual path wherein knowledge of God is being sought through love. Thus these three different kinds of spiritual wayfarers may be seen as three different aspects of any human being in his/her process of learning how to use inner capacities of willing, knowing, and loving respectively, while pursuing the purpose of life: the knowledge of God. And these first three Valleys may be viewed as

descriptions of what is required for these inner capacities to be developed and of what happens while they grow within the hearts of the seekers.

A first question arises: Is there any hierarchical meaning in the order in which these three Valleys are described? From the study of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, knowledge seems to be preeminent to will and love.⁵ And yet in this epistle, knowledge is dealt with after will. One of the reasons why the discussion of knowledge has been postponed until after that of will may be that these three Valleys describe the condition of souls who already had the experiences described in “The Seven Valleys.” Therefore those souls have already used their power of knowing in order to perform their highest act of will, i.e., turning themselves towards the True Beloved. Only then were they enabled to proceed towards a more complete development of their capacities of knowing, loving, and willing.⁶

The First Valley

Whereas the goal of the mystic path is usually considered as the annihilation of the self (Arabic: *faná'*, Persian: *mahv*), in the first Valley Bahá'u'lláh says that “the self (*nafs*) is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned” (*Valleys* 50).

The first spiritual quality that comes to mind while reading these words is “assertiveness,” as clearly defined by Linda Kavelin Popov: “Being assertive means to be positive and confident... being aware that you are a worthy person created by God. You have your very own special gifts. Only you have your unique combination of qualities” (*Virtues Guide* 61).

In fact Bahá'u'lláh states that this station belongs not to any “self” whatsoever, but to “The Self of God (*nafsu'lláh*) standing within Him with laws”⁷ (*Valleys* 50). Here the conditions are described under which the self, as concupiscible soul (*an-nafsu'l-ammára*), may be changed into a well-pleasing self, i.e., a “soul at rest” (*an-nafsu'l-mutma'inna*) (Qur'án 12:53; 89:27). These are the conditions under which the self as “individuality,” that is, as a potential nucleus of divine individual qualities within a person, may grow into an actual heavenly entity, a spiritually mature human being.

First of all the self should be loved. The seeker should be conscious that she/he is not merely a clever animal but is a being endowed with a spiritual potentiality of greatness and nobility. The seat of this potentiality, which is the core of the seeker's individuality, is her/his inner essence and may be viewed as her/his archetype. It is often metaphorically called “heart,” the true self. In the physical plane of existence, the seeker should learn to love and to know this reality by learning how to produce, through the instrumentality of the body and “natal self,” the thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds worthy of its exalted station (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 310).⁸ The material qualities of the natal or carnal self (*an-nafsu'l-ammára*) should be metaphorically killed, as Abraham's “four birds of prey,” and replaced by the divine qualities of the spiritual self (*an-nafsu'l-mutma'inna*). Bahá'u'lláh writes in one of his tablets: “All that which ye potentially possess can... be manifested only as a result of your own volition” (*Gleanings* 149). Therefore this stage could possibly be viewed as the stage of human will.

The beginning of this station “is the realm of conflict,” the conflict typical of a human being who is still unable to properly use his/her psychophysical entity, in order to produce spiritual thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds, mainly because that person has not yet made a definite choice between the material world into which he/she was born and the spiritual worlds towards which he/she is, albeit yet unconsciously, moving. But God is ready to assist in this choice, in the person's striving towards the perfection of the Self. God shows signs both in the outer and inner worlds, so that one may be able to recognize their real meaning: doors opened towards the knowledge of God. A deep philosophical concept is involved in this statement. There is a correspondence between the inner and outer worlds. Both are characterized by an intrinsic order and rationality. But whereas order and rationality are necessary in the outer world, they are the result of a conscious act of volition in the person's inner world. And yet there is in this inner world a potentiality of order and rationality that enables one to identify these attributes, and thus to know and to understand them.

The inner signs may be the same divine qualities God vouchsafed to each human being upon creation. The outer signs are the worlds of creation themselves. But the greatest of all those signs is the Manifestation of God, through whose guidance one can attain to the recognition of the truth that “there is no God save Him” (*Valleys* 51).⁹

If the qualities of the self must be fully realized, we on the one hand should learn how to “read the book of [our] own self” (*kitáb-i-nafs*) (*Valleys* 51), i.e., our own personal qualities. On the other hand, we should never “forget God” (*Valleys* 52), i.e., we should always adhere to the divine laws, as expressed through the Manifestation of God. Self-knowledge on the one hand and knowledge of God on the other seem to be the prerequisites for the true realization of the self. The most important quality for these two goals to be attained is self-effacement (*mahv*). Only if the traveler is able to leave self behind, together with any passion and desire arising therefrom, will she/he be able metaphorically to fling herself/himself into the waves of the Sea of Grandeur, wherein will be discovered the concealed pearls of divine wisdom.

This experience seems very similar to that of the traveler passing through the Valley of Love and entering the Valley of Knowledge. Also there “must the veils of the satanic self (*nafs-i-shaytání*) be burned away,” so “that the spirit may be purified and cleansed (*Valleys* 11). While so doing, the traveler will experience many conflicts between the spiritual and the material side of the soul, i.e., our dual nature. But at the end, will the traveler “behold the mysteries of the Friend and attain to the lights of the Beloved” (*Valleys* 11, 177). It is then that “the throne of splendor” (*‘arsh-i-jalál*) (*Valleys* 50) will be attained.

This is only an inadequate attempt to understand part of the truth enshrined within this precious jewel. But what about feelings and experiences related to this Valley? Is the first Valley that condition when we human beings try to surmount an obstacle hindering us from expressing a divine quality or a feeling constraining us into an attitude of selfishness? It is then that we realize how difficult it is to forget attachments, habits, cherished ideas, and to jump into the sea of life. This huge sea is both attracting and frightening. And like the grammarian of the tale (*Valleys* 51), we often dwell and hesitate on its shores, looking sometimes in envy to others who, like the mystic knower, are already swimming among its waves. Only when we are willing to accept the Will of God, whatsoever it may be, can we seize the opportunities of life, at whatever level of our existence. It is the struggle of decision, of the choice, whatever it may be. And yet it is indispensable to know how to choose, or we will remain motionless on the shores of the sea of life. By far the greatest help in the choices that life requires is to have chosen our supreme Object of love. This is the most, important choice: the Beloved. Whoever forgets or denies God will come to nothing. That one’s heart will fall prey to anguish and fears, because real self will have been forgotten, and the great obscurity of the ignorance of self will fill that one with suspicion, fright, and despair. But if the initial conflict is overcome, then action itself will bestow its inner gifts of joy. And what about the results in practical life? They seem to be but in God’s hands and as such to be accepted.¹⁰

The Second Valley

Knowledge is the distinctive quality of this Valley. Thus the goal of the wayfarer traversing this land is the Manifestation of God as Primal Reason, as “divine, universal mind (*‘aql-i-kullí rabbání*) whose sovereignty enlighteneth all created things (*Valleys* 52). Is not the Manifestation of God indeed described by Bahá’u’lláh as the Repository of all Knowledge?

While describing this Valley, Bahá’u’lláh says how knowledge may be attained: knowledge is a gift of God. That is why “to search after knowledge is irrelevant...” (*Valleys* 53): it is only through fear of God and through God’s bounty that hearts will be enlightened. The required effort then is that minds may be taught “the science of the love of God! [Literally: may be brought to the School of the Merciful (*dabíristánu’l-Rahmán*)]” (*Valleys* 52). Being steadfast in the love of God and detached from “merchandise” and “traffic” (*Valleys* 53); that the heart may be prepared and “be worthy of the descent of heavenly grace” (*Valleys* 54); relying on God’s assistance and submitting to God’s will, with the assurance that “guided indeed is he whom God guideth...” —these are the prerequisites for anyone who wants to reap the fruits of true knowledge. And when those prerequisites will have been fulfilled, then will God bestow the bounty of knowledge at God’s own pleasure. The details of this process are illustrated through a verse from the Súrih of the Cave, wherein says Bahá’u’lláh “the mystery treasured in this plane is divulged...” (*Valleys* 53).

The path is not smooth; the traveler will experience “trial and reverse.” But at the end “the bounteous Cup-Bearer” will “give him to drink of the wine of bestowal from the merciful vessel” and in this exhilaration, from “the lowest abyss” the wayfarer will be drawn “to the summit of glory” (*Valleys* 53, 54, 53). In fact the traveler, having attained “the true standard of knowledge” (*Valleys* 53), will be free from tests and will experience that return to God which Bahá’u’lláh assures us to be possible even during this earthly life.

The idea of knowledge, as it emerges from the study of this Valley, seems quite different from the current idea of knowledge. Knowledge here is not intended as mere intellectual knowledge, which, albeit important and useful, may be the cause of pride and conceit. It is not this partial knowledge that will appease the heart. It is not comprehending a reality that cannot be comprehended in its wholeness that will save a person from the lowest abyss of his/her existence. The knowledge Bahá’u’lláh describes is something else. It is the knowledge that makes the heart fearful and mindful of its Creator, submissive to the Creator’s will. That knowledge is light, a safeguard from tests. It is the knowledge of the Lord and of one’s true Self. There is but one Teacher from Whom such knowledge will be learned and Who manifests the Primal Reason, the Divine, Universal Mind. This School is the best one, because it is the School of God the Merciful (*dabíristánu’l-Rahmán*). It is pursuing this kind of knowledge that, in the metaphor of the Súrih of the Cave, light will leave “the left” of a “feeble brain” and rise above “the right” of an exhilarated heart (*Valleys* 52–53). In that condition, a human being will adopt a true standard of behavior. Life will be easier and freer from tests for the person and for those nearby. Otherwise intellectual knowledge alone, with the sense of accomplishment, of superiority that it sometimes implies, can be a real trap for the deceived heart. It may be

a cause of pride and vainglory, of great test for one and for those about one. In later writings, however, Bahá'u'lláh dwells on the theme of knowledge at greater length, explaining how both intellectual and inner knowledge are praiseworthy, but intellectual knowledge is subordinated, in its importance and results, to spiritual knowledge.¹¹

The Third Valley

The theme of love is the leitmotiv of this Valley. The goal is God as the Attracting One: the One Who draws all creatures to that Self. The seekers are defined as “loving seekers.” The reality ascribed to this Valley is “the beauty of love” (*Valleys* 54).

The description of this Valley is reminiscent of the description of the Valley of Love in “The Seven Valleys.” The prerequisites are the same: First of all the self should be forgotten, “Leave thyself behind, and then approach Me” (*Valleys* 55). Even reason should be abandoned, and love’s “lunacies seventy-and-two” (*Valleys* 54) should be accepted. There is but one thing to do: to advance forthwith towards the Beloved.

Detachment seems the most important quality so that the spiritual capacity of love may be used in the best way and the lover may attain the supreme object of desire: the Attracting One. Detachment from the self implies unconditional obedience to the commandments of God, as exemplified by the “companions of the Cave” (*Valleys* 55), who preferred to seclude themselves in an obscure cave, where death would have been their undoubted lot, rather than sacrificing to the pagan gods. Detachment from the self implies a spirit of sacrifice, wherefore no battle is too difficult or unwelcome when “fought in the cause of the Beloved” (*Valleys* 55). It implies detachment from “the reign of reason” (*Valleys* 55) and a willingness to accept any apparent insanity in the search of the pleasure of the Beloved.

All these nonsenses can the seeker accept because of entering the “Tavern where the wine they buy and sell” (*Valleys* 56). The seeker has read the words of the Friend, has drunk them as a pure wine, and has become exhilarated. The seeker has gazed upon the face of the Beloved and therefrom has learned all she/he had to learn. The world of creation, here symbolized through “His musky hair,” and the world of human knowledge, here epitomized as Avicenna’s “Cyclic Scheme” (*Valleys* 56), are but an introduction to the knowledge that can be acquired through the Beloved. It is then that “the mote of knowledge in [his] spirit” is able to “escape desire and the lowly clay” and the “drop of wisdom” of the cleansed soul can at last “merge with [God’s] mighty sea” (*Valleys* 57).

Love—a magical word. Romanticism has tinged the idea of love with a hue of outer beauty that is often untrue. Therefore sometimes people are in love with love itself and yet wholly ignorant of its often challenging reality. Love is difficult; it is hard to love, hard to be loved. There is in this act a resemblance to death itself. To accept or to give love means to renounce a part of oneself. That is why love is crazy and blind. How will a living being accept an experience reminiscent of death? And yet the awareness of death and life is such as to change according to the level of inner experience one has reached. Is not death sometimes the beginning of life?

To love means to be conscious of, and to surrender to, a powerful, irresistible attraction towards the Beloved. Only motion towards the Beloved brings peace to the heart. Any other experience is utterly irrelevant. Love demands a nearness, which appeases the longing heart, but only when it is so close as to imply a complete identification between the lover and the Beloved. It is like a humble drop of water merging with the mighty sea.

Only the power of this attraction enables “these loving seekers” to accept such detachment as nearness requires. In their effort to reach the Beloved, they forget everything: self, reason, human ties. It is then that a battle, with all its ensuing pain, may appear as a “beauty’s bower” (*Valleys* 55). It is then that the stony path of love will be accepted in its sometimes outwardly repelling aspects. But at the end of this path an inner joy is waiting, arising from the abandonment of “the lowly clay” with all its hindering weight and from the longed for reunion with the “mighty sea” (*Valleys* 57).

To summarize the first three Valleys: in the first Valley, the self, with its aspiration to realize its hidden potentialities and to become similar to the Self of God, requires the capacity of willing, intended as willingness to turn towards the true Beloved, willingness to choose a course of action, to determine which thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds to manifest in this earthly life so that the self may be transformed into a divine, angelic identity. In the second Valley, reason, in its yearning to acquire knowledge of outer and inner reality, requires the guidance of a divine universal mind that will “teach it the science of the love of God” (*Valleys* 52). The acceptance of this guidance is the secret to acquiring a real and sound knowledge. No book is necessary. What is required is submission to the Will of God, in the assurance that God is omniscient and omnipotent, and reason can but bow before God. This is the essence of such a fear of God as will fling wide open the doors to real and sound knowledge. In the third Valley, love, in its aspiration of immersing itself in the Sea of the Attracting One, requires the capacity of surrendering to the Beloved, whatever the price, in the assurance that this surrender is the essence of all joy.

The spiritual adventures described in these three Valleys differ from each other only in their details; the major themes are common to all three. The traveler starts from a condition of conflict and trial, from which

emergence will only be possible if the traveler initiates the independent action of cleansing the heart, through submission to the Will of God. Thus, with God's assistance, the wayfarer will reach the goal of selflessness, wherein will she/he experience a condition of contentment and joy.

As to the initial condition of conflict and trial, in the first Valley Bahá'u'lláh writes that "at the beginning, this plane is the realm of conflict (*mahall-i-jidál*),..."; in the second Valley: "On this plane, the traveler meeteth with many a trial (*talátum*) and reverse (*tamátám*)"; and in the third Valley: "... and to them beauty's bower differeth not from the field of a battle (*maydán-i-jidál*) fought in the cause of the Beloved (*dar sabíl-i-mahbúb*, literally: upon the path of the Beloved)." And moreover: "The pain of Thee (*jawr-at*) hath firmly barred the gate of hope (*dar-i-umíd*) as well" (*Valleys* 50, 53, 55, 56).

The need for human independent action is described with the following words. In the first Valley, Bahá'u'lláh writes, "One must, then, read the book of his own self (*kitába'n-nafs*), rather than some treatise on rhetoric," a concept that is elaborated in "the story...of a mystic knower (*'arif-i-iláhi*), who...straightway flung himself into the waves,..." suggesting to his wavering companion: "Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves'." In the second Valley, Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that "a man should make ready his heart (*dil*) that it be worthy of the descent of heavenly grace..." In the third Valley, Bahá'u'lláh says that "the denizens of this plane speak no words—but they gallop their chargers" (*Valleys* 51, 51–52, 54, 55). In the second Valley, Bahá'u'lláh quotes the following verse from the Qur'án: "For the like of this let the travelers travail" (37:59, quoted in *Valleys* 54).

This required action is mainly in the direction of cleansing the heart. In the first Valley, Bahá'u'lláh counsels the wayfarer: "Kill these four birds of prey', that after death the riddle of life may be unraveled," and quotes from the Qur'án: "Oh, thou soul who art well assured, Return to thy Lord, well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him..." (89:27–30, quoted in *Valleys* 50). In the second Valley, Bahá'u'lláh points out that "a man should make ready his heart that it be worthy of the descent of heavenly grace..." And in the third Valley Bahá'u'lláh quotes a prayer by Rúmí: "Grant that the mote of knowledge in my spirit (*dharríhy-i-'ilmí kih dar ján-i-man ast*)/ Escape desire and the lowly clay (*va rahán-ash az havá va kháq-i-past*)" (*Valleys* 54, 57), clearly requesting that the heart may be cleansed.

This cleansing of the heart may be obtained only through a wholehearted submission to the Will of God. In the first Valley Bahá'u'lláh says: "... this station appertaineth to the self—but that self which is 'The Self of God standing within Him with laws' (*nafsu'lláhu qa'imatum fíhi bi'l-sunan*)," and "This is the plane of the soul who is pleasing unto God (*nafs-i-mardíyyih*)" (*Valleys* 50) and suggests: "And be ye not like those who forget God..." (Qur'án 59:19, quoted in *Valleys* 52). In the second Valley, Bahá'u'lláh thus admonishes the seeker:

Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee?
Teach it the science of the love of God! (*gúsh girash dar dabíristánu'l-Rahmán darár*)
(Literally: take hold of it, and bring it to the School of the Merciful) (*Valleys* 52)

Whereas in the third Valley Bahá'u'lláh quotes the example of the companions of the Cave described in the Qur'án as they who "speak not till He hath spoken; and... do His bidding" (21:27, quoted in *Valleys* 55).

The goal of selflessness is clearly indicated in the first Valley with the following words:

The death of self (*mah v*) is needed here, not rhetoric (*nah v*);
Be nothing (*mah ví*), then, and walk upon the waves. (*Valleys* 52)

In the second Valley the companions of the Cave are again mentioned as examples of selflessness: "Men whom neither merchandise nor traffic beguile from the remembrance of God (*dhikru'lláh*)" (Qur'án 24:37, quoted in *Valleys* 53), and the following verse of the Qur'án is quoted: "Verily we are from God, and to Him shall we return" (2:151, quoted in *Valleys* 54). In the third Valley, Bahá'u'lláh quotes a tradition: "Hence, one of the Prophets of God hath asked: 'O my Lord, how shall we reach unto Thee?' And the answer came, 'Leave thyself behind, and then approach Me'" (*Valleys* 55).

However, for the goal of selflessness to be attained, the help of God is required. Bahá'u'lláh explains this concept, quoting once more a number of verses from the Qur'án: "Hereafter We will show them Our signs in the regions of the earth, and in themselves, until it become manifest unto them that it is the truth'..." (Qur'án 41:53, quoted in *Valleys* 51) in the first Valley; "Guided indeed is he whom God guideth; but for him whom He misleadeth, thou shalt by no means find a patron" (Qur'án 18:16, quoted in *Valleys* 53) in the second Valley; "There is no power or might save in God, the Protector, the Self-Subsistent" (Qur'án 18:37, quoted in *Valleys* 57) in the third Valley.

And at last Bahá'u'lláh describes the final condition of joy and contentment attained by the seeker, when he writes that the first Valley “endeth in attainment to the throne of splendor” (*arsh-i-jalál*) and quotes the Qur'án: “And enter thou My paradise” (89:30, quoted in *Valleys* 50). He says moreover that the second Valley “conferreth the true standard (*míẓán*) of knowledge, and freeth man from tests (*páyán-i-imtihán*: end of tests)” (*Valleys* 53). And in the third Valley, Bahá'u'lláh quotes the following prayer:

Graut that Thine ancient gift, this drop of wisdom (*dharríhy-i-ilmí*),
Merge with Thy mighty sea (*daryáy-i-khísh*). (*Valleys* 57)

Thus, if the starting points and the spiritual realities to which these three Valleys are ascribed are different, their courses do not seem so far from each other. A prerequisite is common to all three: forgetting the self by leaving behind anything the self has acquired that does not conform to the divine Will, by being ready to do anything so that the Beloved's will may be realized, and by becoming the Beloved's willing, conscious, and loving instruments.

Human beings differ from one another, and different human beings may excel in one or the other aspect of the willing, knowing, and loving capacities of their soul. And yet, the fulfilment of the purpose of human Life requires harmonious development of all these capacities.¹³ This is why it seems likely that each human being must have an experience of each of these three Valleys. Otherwise growth could be unbalanced.

The Fourth Valley

The fourth Valley, describing as it seems to do, the lofty and unattainable condition of the Manifestations of God, could also suggest a hint of the glory of the goal of perfection towards which human beings should strive, albeit assured that such a perfection will never be theirs.

The opening words of the description of this Valley announce that it is different from the others. In those Valleys Bahá'u'lláh spoke of goals to be searched for, or of precincts within which “the loving seekers wish(ed) to live,” but here he describes “mystic knowers” (*'arífán*) “who have [already] reached to the beauty of the Beloved One...” Their “station is the apex of consciousness and the secret of divine guidance” (*Valleys* 54, 57). Beyond this no one can go.

Bahá'u'lláh says very clearly that no human being can fully understand this condition. It is a “bottomless” and fathomless sea; “It is the blackest of nights...” (*Valleys* 58). And even those who know its secrets will explain them only if they meet true seekers, albeit conscious that by so doing they will be persecuted even to death. But in this stage there is no fear, neither of pain nor of death: there are only “full awareness,” “utter self-effacement,” and complete detachment (*Valleys* 60).

It is while Bahá'u'lláh describes this condition that he makes what Bausani defined as Bahá'u'lláh's “confession” (*Saggi* 472) of divinity, having caught, like the Jacob of old, “the fragrance of His garment blowing from the Egypt of Bahá” (*Valleys* 59), Bahá'u'lláh is, ready to obey “the duty of long years of love” and give the announcement of his lofty station, so “that land and sky may laugh aloud today, / And it may gladden mind and heart and eye” (*Valleys* 60).

Such is the self-effacement in this station, that even love is perceived as “a veil betwixt the lover and the beloved,” and as a shroud that will lessen the joy of nearness to such a “beauty's rose” (*Valleys* 60). Was not in fact the Manifestation of God described as “the Primal Veil of God,” a Veil above which “ye can find nothing other than God...” (The Báb, *Selections* 131)?

Bahá'u'lláh defines this Valley as “the realm of Absolute Command” (*'álam-i-amr*) (*Valleys* 60), which among the divine kingdoms described by Islamic mystics is the realm wherein the divine Manifestations abide invested with their full authority over all created things.¹⁴

He describes “the exalted dwellers in this mansion” as kingly personages sat upon “the Throne of the Ancient of Days... in the Empyrean of Might within the Lofty Pavilion,” wielding “divine authority” and bearing “a kingly sceptre,” issuing their commands, and bestowing “gifts according to each man's deserving” (*Valleys* 60–61).¹⁵ Their condition is that of perfect peace. And yet they are in continuous activity and proffer an incorruptible food and a delicate draught that confer knowledge, love, faith, and power to anyone who partakes of them.

Bahá'u'lláh describes other qualities of this Valley as the Great Infallibility, astonishment, and poverty. The Great Infallibility (*ismat*), the intrinsic attribute of the Manifestations of God; is exhaustively explained by Bahá'u'lláh in later Writings.¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh dwelt on astonishment (*hayrat*) and poverty (*faqr-i-baht*) in “The Seven Valleys” (*Valleys* 31–41).

Webster's dictionary defines *astonishment* as “the state... of one who is astonished” and “astonish” as “to strike with a sudden sense of surprise or wonder especially through something unexpected or difficult to accept as

true or reasonable” (135). Saccone, while commenting upon the word *hayrat* within the context of ‘Attár’s poem “The Language of the Birds” (*Mantiq’u’t-Tayr*), writes:

Hayrat (astonishment, perplexity) is ‘a feeling of dismay or perplexity in front of a situation which appears as having no way out or in front of incompatible truth on the rational level. It is the ultimate crisis of a mind which meets with its own limits’ (T. Burkhardt, *Letters of a Sufi Master*). In his “Description of the Valley of Wonderment,” ‘Attár speaks about *hayrat* as the mental condition of any one who has seen what he does not know and makes every effort so that he may remember, a conception reminiscent of Platonic anamnesis. *Astonishment* is also a term which describes the psychological condition of anyone who ignores the divine unity and is confused by the multiplicity of phenomena.

Elsewhere he writes:

Astonishment (*hayrat*) presupposes a ‘reminiscence’ of a lost communion of the soul with the divine, takes on the form of an irreversible crisis of estrangement from the phenomenal world and of an initial awareness of an urgent ‘return.’¹⁷

Therefore it seems that in Islamic tradition astonishment is viewed as an inner feeling of bewilderment which comes upon anyone going through “a psychological reversal, that is also an overthrow of common values, typical of any mystical experience” (Saccone, *Verbo degli Uccelli* 229, n. 19), wherefore suddenly the concrete (matter) becomes unreal and the abstract (the spiritual) becomes concrete. Thus any previous perspective is reversed, and any relation is cut short with anyone who did not go through the same experience.

The concept of poverty in Islam is thus commented upon by Bausani:

The concept of poverty is very ancient in Islam and goes back to the very frugal and sober ways of the Prophet himself, because of his direct contact with the simple customs of the Arabs of the desert. According to a famous, frequently quoted by mystics, *hadít*, he said *al-faqrú fah rí* (‘poverty is my vaunt’). However, *Faqr* was often interpreted as a metaphor, namely as not having any personal merit, being nothing, the poorest of all the poor ones in front of the supreme wealth of the Wealthy One; however orders of true *faqír* do exist... (Author’s translation of *L’Islam* 93)

Because of these qualities, the Manifestations of God enjoy perfect nearness to God and may be identified with God: “...they see with His eyes, hear with His ears,” and if they “say ‘Be’...it is...” (*Valleys* 63).

At the end of his explanation of this exalted station, Bahá’u’lláh reminds his addressee that all He said is but “a single Point” (*Valleys* 63) when compared to a whole discourse. The mystery of their station is bound to remain veiled to human eyes.

In the conclusion of his short but precious epistle, Bahá’u’lláh returns to the flourished style of the prologue. And yet he also conveys other important meanings. He reminds his addressee that “Love’s secrets” are better said “some other way” (*Valleys* 64). Inner realities can be better conveyed through images and metaphors, as Bahá’u’lláh actually did in his epistle. Moreover, they can be said only to a certain extent. Beyond this it is impossible to proceed, both for the incapacity of the addressees and also for the lofty station of the Lord, defying any attempt to describe his greatness. As Bahá’u’lláh concludes his epistle:” ‘Far be the glory of thy Lord, the Lord of all greatness, from what they affirm of Him’ “(Qur’án 37:180, quoted in *Valleys* 65).

Notes

1. An Iraqi town near the Persian border.
2. In the exposition of this commentary, any expressed idea is offered only as a possible interpretation. The meanings of words and sentences are always intended as one of their many possible meanings. Albeit such locutions as “It seems that when Bahá’u’lláh said so and so, he may have expressed the meaning that or “This is one of the meanings of such and such words written by Bahá’u’lláh would clearly convey the exact intention of this author, nonetheless, their continuous repetition would hinder the flow of the text. For this reason, they are not always explicitly expressed, but they are always implied.
3. See below, “First Valley” section and page 22.

4. As to the words mystic knowers (*'arifán*), it is interesting to note that this Arabic word has the same root as the word *'irfán*, which can be translated as “inner knowledge.” The Valley of Knowledge is *vádíy-i-'irfán*. Therefore, *'arifán* could be those seekers who have acquired “inner knowledge,” the knowledge of the heart. As to the meaning of *'arif* in Islamic philosophical thought, Alessandro Bausani describes the *'arif* as “the gnostic who considers the whole philosophy as a mere introduction to a fulfilling ‘vision’ which is utterly unknown to our modern philosophy and perhaps also to the purest Aristotelianism of Averroës” (*Persia Religiosa* 215).

5. This concept is explained by W. S. Hatcher, who writes: “A close examination of the psychology of the spiritual growth process as presented in the Bahá'í writings indicates that the proper and harmonious functioning of our basic spiritual capacities depends on recognizing a hierarchical relationship among them. At the apex of this hierarchy is the knowing capacity” (“Concept of Spirituality” 19–20). Hatcher confirms his statement through a passage by Bahá'u'lláh: “First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding” (*Gleanings* 194).

6. From the point of view of comparative religion, these three valleys may be compared to the three ways of achieving salvation from suffering (*Moksa*) described by Hinduistic religions: the way of deeds (*Karma-márga*), the path of enlightenment (*Jñá-márga*), and the path of love and worship (*Bhakti-márga*).

7. The concepts of self and Self of God, as explained by Bahá'u'lláh, have been discussed in other papers. See for example Cole, “The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings.”

8. “Natal self” is a locution 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses to describe humankind's animal nature, with its natural emotions, which may be gratified and nurtured until it becomes the governor of human life or which may be educated and transformed into an instrument for humankind's divine nature, that it may express its divine qualities in the form of spiritual thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds.

9. In “An Analysis of The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh,” W. S. Hatcher describes “the ongoing and eternal encounter between God and humanity—between us and the One who created us.” He says that “as humans, we encounter or experience the divine in at least three ways. First, through the orderly, regular, and lawful character of the physical universe, we encounter God as Creator.... Second, we encounter God through the Person of the various Manifestations or Revelators who have appeared in history. These are the founders of the great religions, the divine Messengers.... Third, we experience God as an indwelling spirit within our own hearts” (75). He adds then: “...by instituting on earth the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Dispensation, God has made available to humankind an entirely new experience of Himself—the experience of the divine presence within a collective institution whose members are ordinarily endowed human beings” (Hatcher, “An Analysis” 89–90).

10. Words of ancient wisdom echo: Krishna's answer to doubtful Arjuna who was asking him why should he act, was: “... always perform the action that must be performed, free of attachments [to its results, a.n.]...” (*Bhagavad-Gita* 3:19).

11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented on this theme: “Training in morals and good conduct is far more important than book learning.... The reason for this is that the child who conducts himself well, even though he be ignorant, is of benefit to others, while an ill-natured, ill-behaved child is corrupted and harmful to others, even though he be learned. If, however, the child be trained to be both learned and good, the result is light upon light” (*Selections* 135–36).

12. Bausani writes that in the Persian poetical cyphered language the “‘Tavern’ [is] a symbol of esoteric knowledge” (*Persia Religiosa* 307). Of course “esoteric knowledge” may be here intended as “inner or spiritual knowledge.” It should be observed, moreover, that a “Tavern” is a forbidden and immoral place in the Islamic world, in view of the quranic prohibition of drinking alcohol. Therefore the idea of the insanity of lovers is here stressed.

13. W. S. Hatcher defines spirituality as “the full, adequate, proper, and harmonious development of one's spiritual capacities” (“Concept of Spirituality” 2).

14. This world is also called *Jabarút*.

15. In the original text these sentences convey deeper philosophical allusions than in the English version. The sentences “wield divine authority” (*ulúhíyyat mí-namáyand*) and “bear a kingly sceptre” (*rubúbíyyat mífarmayand*) clearly refer to the “mystic knowers” abiding in this station as partakers of the station of *ulúhíyyat*, which may be translated as “Godhead,” and of *rubúbíyyat*, which may be translated as “Lordship.”

16. See for example, *Tablets* 108–9, as well as *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 47, 183. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that “infallibility” of the Manifestations of God means that “whatever emanates from Them is identical with the truth, and conformable to reality,” that “They are not under the shadow of the former laws,” and “Whatever They say is the word of God, and whatever They perform is an upright action” (*Some Answered Questions* 173).

17. Saccone in 'Attár, *Verbo degli Uccelli*, 156, n. 4; 209, n. 27. The concept of astonishment is not extraneous to the earliest Christian tradition. Clement of Alexandria (second–third century) ascribes to Jesus Christ

the following statements: “Whosoever is astonished will reign” (*Stromata* 2:9) and: “Whosoever seeks out will not stop until he has found. As soon as he finds, he will be astonished, and inasmuch as he is astonished, he will reign. And as he will have attained unto the kingdom, he will rest” (*Stromata* 5:14).

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