**TALK OUTLINES, NORWAY 2017**

**Day 1, Morning: The Widening Gyre**

Main idea: Humanity is in the midst of a collective leap forward, the culmination of a “coming of age” that began with the first Copernican revolution in 1543.

* The vortex of the present
* Political, cultural, environmental upheaval
* We seem to be hurtling towards an unknown climax
* A “century of light”: We are living in a spectacular time. Explosion of information, technology, improvements in quality of life, poverty reduction. Avalanche of discoveries. A shrinking and increasingly interconnected world.
* A century of darkness: War, tribalism, “othering”, pillage of the environment, hunger and disease, widening gap between rich and poor. Top 8 richest people control 50% of world’s wealth.
	+ In 2017, we can look back on more than a century of global upheavals since the beginning of WW I in 1914
	+ The secularization of the West and the eclipse of the sacred.
	+ The war between radical Islam and the West. The world has no solution for this.
* The urgency of the present hour:
	+ Tenuous order emerging from the ashes of WW II suffering accelerating breaking down.
		- Political: tribalisms of the left and the right
		- Economic: increasing gap between the rich and poor. World’s 8 richest have half the wealth.
		- Stresses on the environment beginning to be felt globally.
	+ Will not discuss this week the politics of the present: Instead, try to get to the root of what is transpiring. The problem is fundamentally “spiritual” in nature – humanity is passing through a turbulent adolescence.
* The verge of the new
* “The world has -- at least the thinking world -- caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago… But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly…”
* What are these “deeper teachings”?
* Assume: Not unity, social justice, service to others, race unity, equality of women and men, elimination extremes of wealth and poverty, etc.: The world has at least in theory “caught up” with these – they are “known” and widely accepted in theory if not in practice
* The next several sessions will explore some possibilities.
* Important cautions to bear mind:
	+ Our imperfect and incomplete understanding.
	+ A central approach for these sessions: Looking at the Bahá’í teachings as 3-D instead of 2-D (as the former accommodates “poles”; the “dark side of the moon”).
	+ Be prepared to be uncomfortable; to be willing to question deeply held assumptions.
	+ Encourage discussion between sessions. Q&A at end of each. Push-back encouraged: Is something essential being left out of the picture?
* The context of the present: Zoom out!
	+ Times scales of interest to us are **centuries**, not **decades**.
	+ Human history is characterized by long stretches of relative stability punctuated by leaps forward.
	+ Leap #1: The birth of the human (ca. 100,000 B.C.)
		- Man as a being that creates meaning (vs. a being that survives and passes on its genes)
		- Homo sapiens and the emergence of abstract thought (Harari – “Sapiens”)
		- A necessary step to allow human to organize beyond the “tribal” level, Dunbar’s number (but “tribal” thinking still persists)
	+ Leap #2: The “axial” age. Athens vs. Jerusalem
		- A certain way of looking abstractly at the world is formalized—differently in different cultures, but sharing common themes:
			* We are “in” the world but not “of” it.
			* We are moving from appearance to reality
			* Life is a journey from a “lower” to a “higher” state; from bondage to freedom, darkness to light
			* In the axial way of thinking, everyday life offers a mere shadow of reality: but with effort we can get to the essence, which is clearer and more beautiful.
		- Two versions of the axial model have defined the history of ideas in the West for 2500 years.
			* Two different approaches to the question of how the world works and how we obtain knowledge. Reason “vs” revelation. “Science” vs. “religion”. “Athens” vs. “Jerusalem”.
		- “Athens”. Platonism
			* Plato’s core intuition confirmed by modern physics: that the physical world fundamentally embodies beautiful concepts that exhibit mathematical regularity and symmetry. That “the most basic structures of the world (atoms) are embodiments of pure concepts that can be discovered and articulated by the unaided Mind.”
		- “Jerusalem”. The Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition
* Revelation trumps reason as explanatory factor.
	+ - Are these two really irreconcilable?
			* Both are axial (one “top-down”, the other “bottom-up”)
			* The medieval synthesis (Aquinas)
			* Baha’u’llah regards Socrates, Plato, Aristotle as “divine philosophers” – includes them as part of the “spiritual” tradition
			* Conceptual rigging will need to be replaced before modern synthesis can be achieved.
	+ Leap #3: The Enlightenment
		- Rejection of received authority (scientific, medical, political, historical, religious, etc.)
		- Embrace of reason, investigation of reality as foundation
		- intellect becomes the center of the truth-seeking enterprise. Individuals also now responsble for deciding moral questions
		- Truth is sought more in the future/present than in the past, since knowledge is cumulative
		- Emergence from self-imposed immaturity (Kant) and coming-of-age of the individual
		- Ripples on a pond -- or successive shattering of crystalline spheres -- religion the last, greatest domain of human activity to be deeply impacted. Most modern religious thought is either “pre-enlightenment” or “contra-enlightenment” in its orientation.
* The death of narratives and the anchorless present
	+ Two-story building model has collapsed in both directions
		- The collapse of Cartesian dualism
		- The death of the mechanistic world view
	+ The severing of the Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy)
	+ The death of God (Nietzsche)
	+ Local/traditional narratives subsumed by “world culture” of consumerism.
	+ Religious answers and perspectives no longer work. Tribalism deepens.
	+ Old paradigms must decisively break (Kuhn)
		- The wildfire clears out the useless weeds/ideologies
	+ Yeat’s “Second Coming”
	+ Modern society gives no answer but accumulating things and experiences
	+ A world of facts/information with no coherence
		- A tile mosaic with the cement removed - scattered pieces
* The turning point: Continuation and culmination of the “Greater Enlightenment” -- “the Spiritual coming of age of the human race”
* What if the “Enlightenment” is still ongoing?
* The power of ideas
	+ History is driven by ideas more than socio-economic forces (Hegel)
	+ Example: Enlightenment thought resulting in new political, economic structures
* The “third Copernican revolution” and successive displacements from the center
	+ “First”: Copernican (first astronomical, then biological - Darwin. “Universal acid”). We are not at the physical center.
	+ “Second”: Kantian. Participation of the mind as active agent in structuring reality. “Things in themselves” forever unknown.
	+ “Third”: Baha’i Faith. Relativity of religious truth and spiritual standpoint.
	+ Collectively: Emergence from adolescence to maturity (why make the comparison? Intuition that the microcosm and the macrocosm may be correlated. Also cf. Kant)
* The “verge of the new”: The Baha’i Faith is a fundamental reconfiguration of religious identity - an incipient revolution
	+ A re-expression of the timeless essence of the sacred, in a new form.
	+ Solves, simultaneously, the problem of 1) tribalism/religious diversity, and 2) science-religion conflict
		- The real fault lines: not between “theism” and “atheism” but between 1) belief in structured and meaningful vs. random and meaningless universe, and 2) between one “tribalistic identity” and another. -- i.e., “science-religion conflict” and “religious diversity”.
		- The Faith offers a solution for both.
	+ How? a) anti-dogmatic, b) relativizes absolutes -- makes room for differing perspectives. c) fully embrace science. Rejects “magical” thinking about spiritual realities.
	+ We will explore “how” in the following sessions
	+ Must be “forwards” not “backwards” orientation -- cannot return to old patterns of thought -- cannot “unring the bell”
		- Traditional theology broken. Future theology spiritual but non-dualistic. Rejoining science/religion/theology. how?
		- The arrowhead of truth points into the future, not the past or some primordial tradition or original Text
		- From belief, through unbelief, to understanding (Durant; and Hegel’s thesis-antithesis-synthesis)

**Day 1, Afternoon: Science, religion and the new physics**

Main idea: The conceptual pillars of modern physics map onto deeper spiritual principles

* Relativity (feature of the observing subject)
	+ In physics: Space and time; matter and energy. Special and general relativity
	+ The same subject can be represented faithfully and without loss in many different ways.
	+ The relativity of religious truth and progressive revelation (in “time”)
	+ The relativity of spiritual perspectives and stations (in “space”)
* Complementarity (feature of the observing subject)
	+ In physics: quantum mechanics; particles and waves; uncertainty principle
	+ No single perspective exhausts reality. *But in observing it, you must pick a particular one*.
	+ Mutual “irreconcilable” perspectives can be equally valid.
	+ Bohr: ordinary propositions are exhausted by their literal meaning, and the opposite of an ordinary truth is a falsehood. *Deep propositions have the feature that their opposites are also deep truths*.
	+ Waves and particles
	+ Substance dualism vs. perspectival monism
* Symmetry/invariance (inhering in the object)
	+ In physics: Underlies formulation of basic laws
	+ Similar to relativity but emphasizes the object rather than the subject (Wilczek).
	+ Circles and butterflies: that which preserves through change
	+ Invariance: certain features are common to all representations.
	+ Wilczek: “The far-fetched idea that symmetry dictates structure… has become, at the unmapped frontiers of the unknown, our guiding star. It is an idea almost blasphemous in its audacity, for it claims that we can decode the Artisan’s working methods, and suggests precisely how to do it.”
	+ The macrocosm and the microcosm. Hermes and the Emerald Tablet.
	+ The oneness of religion and of humanity
* Conclusions so far?
	+ There is a deep underlying structure
	+ Reality can only be approximated
	+ Suggestive parallels between physical and spiritual principles

**Day 2, Morning: Maps of reality and the limits of language**

Main idea: Reality can only be approximated; multiple narratives are inevitable (outcome of complementarity)

* Reality can only be approximated
	+ “…the essential reality underlying any given phenomenon is unknown.”
	+ Flat earth (we forget what a good approximation this is in everyday life), Tagore, Newton, Einstein
	+ 99% right can be 100% wrong: orbit of mercury
	+ The subway map - inevitable distortion
* Language as limited vehicle
	+ Do words “carve nature at its joints”? Can we make accurate maps with them? (Plato)
	+ Why should we assume that every possible reality, not to mention ultimate Reality, should be caught up in the coarse net of language, vocabulary, grammar? Like the waters of the sea that sustain all life within it, ultimate reality slips through the crude net of words.
	+ The ocean and the net (Baha’u’llah; James?)
	+ The snare and the rabbit (Chuang Tzu)
	+ Different languages: human language, mathematics, music, painting etc.
* The inevitability of simultaneous narratives
	+ A consequence of complementarity: “Points poles apart”
	+ The four schools of thought: “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements”
	+ Lawh-i-Jamal; The Manifestation: God or Man?
	+ Gems of Divine Mysteries: the truth of conflicting perspectives “within their own station”
	+ Infallibility: essential reality or practical expedient? (Lample p.253)
* We cannot comprehend until we are ready
	+ Piaget: volumetric flasks
	+ Those who make the cognitive leap before others may be denounced as heretics, geniuses, saints… or prophets
	+ Emerson: “our eyes are holden…”
* Raises for the first time the possibility of a spiritual movement grounded *not upon a fixed set of dogmas but upon a posture of being and acting in the world*

**Day 2, Afternoon: Old narratives rewritten: God, spirit, and nature**

Main idea: Traditional dualistic theological categories are recast by the principles of relativity and complementarity.

* The oneness and existence of God
	+ The prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God - still dominant in the language of the Writings of the Twin Manifestations. The best approximation within the framework of everyday lived human experience. We could hardly live otherwise -- as did most people throughout human history -- than to move about our daily business as though the earth were flat. It is only when we leave the world of the everyday, soaring high in the air or traveling far beyond the horizon, that this daily certainty must be replaced by a larger truth.
	+ “The Divine reality is sanctified from singleness, then how much more from plurality.” SAQ
	+ The best we can do is describe God using attributes we are familiar with: greatness, existence, merficulness etc.
	+ God as object of worship: The Bab on prayer
	+ Tillich and Buber on God
* Nature and the Primal Will
	+ The Tablet of Wisdom
* Spirit and soul
	+ Differentiating substance from matter
	+ Tablet of the Universe (Abdu’l-Baha)
	+ The soul as mode of the divine remembrance (the Bab)
		- cf. Sophie’s World - Sophie a creation of the author.
* The “theology of the dotted line”
	+ The spiritual pragmatism of Baha’u’llah
	+ Rather than focus on unknowable realities, focus on practical, collective action
	+ How do you judge what is true? No access to the Reality layer. Must judge “by their fruits”.

**Day 3, Morning and afternoon: Reflection on the Bicentenary: The Revelation of the Bab and Baha’u’llah**

* Opening remarks in the context of the bicentenary
	+ If theologies are approximative maps, who are the cartographers?
	+ In our case, twin Cartographers.
	+ The bicentenary underlines, for the first time on the world stage, the existence of *two* prophets living at the same time. A curious story!
		- birthdays were two years apart
		- lived in the same country, at one point only a few miles from each other
		- never met in person!
	+ The bicentenary celebrations will be bringing focus upon the “personalities” and not just the “teachings”.
		- The world will ask: “why two?” “and why do we hear so much more about the one than the other?”
		- Shoghi Effendi establishes the Bab as co-equal.
	+ In the past the Bab has been backgrounded: challenging nature of the revelation. About which we will speak of later.
	+ Even more challenging: The context of the modern world
		- Increasingly secular mindset rejects the possibility of divine authority, privileged knowledge.
		- “Why do we need a prophet in the first place?” Hasn’t one of the great advances of the Enlightenment been that we no longer need Prophets to tell us what is true, and how to live? Haven’t the collective exertions of the human intellect replaced the need for guidance from above?
		- My claim: The twin Revelations are a continuation of a centuries-long process that began with the Scientific Revolution -- a “greater Enlightenment”.
		- They represent the culmination of the process of the coming-of-age of the human race.
		- We cannot go back to our collective childhood. As comfortable as the thought may be.
		- Magical/supernatural views untenable. The universe does operate according to fixed laws. SAQ #1. Very much a post-enlightenment view!
		- Can we find an interpretation of the Manifestation as a “natural” phenomenon?
		- Remembering that we have just re-defined the “natural” -- a simplistic answer would be that nature=God’s will and we are done! But I will try to go a little deeper.
		- Let me start by making a suggestion: “Genius” of other kinds -- in music, in mathematics, in chess -- and Norway has more than its share of this kind of genius! -- is also “naturally occurring”, and unexplainable. Is Prophecy a form of genius, that appears when conditions are right, like the fruit that appears on the tree in its appointed season? SAQ #50
* Who is the Prophet? What is their function? (various non-magical views)
	+ Vs. Top-down, “supernatural”. The monolith. Moses and the tablets.
	+ The primal veil: intermediate between the “seen” and the “unseen”. They are the “dotted line”.
	+ Twin stations (quotes)
	+ “Universal divine mind”
	+ The Prophet as fruit (already cited)
	+ The Prophet as physician
	+ The Prophet as educator
	+ The Prophet as artist; musician (both musician and composer): The violin player in the subway
	+ Art as product of the Holy Spirit: “Divine Revelation” is the product of this Spirit working in the mind of the Prophet
	+ The Prophet as comprehender of “essential relationships”
	+ Abdu’l-Baha’s insight: Interconnectedness as “axis”
		- Supernatural vs. natural phenomenon
		- Expression of *necessary relationships*
	+ Most important quality: the “bearer of divine revelation”. Expressed in words. Next session!
* The Word of God
	+ The magic and power of words in general-- “dark squiggles on a page” (Sagan)
		- Proof that matter and spirit are intimately related
	+ Uniqueness/power of their words: characteristic features
		- Uniqueness; “No breeze can compare with the breezes of Divine Revelation…”
		- Penetrative power: Townshend and others: shivers the air
		- Challenging/abstruse
			* The Bab’s Unique use of language; number, form and content
			* In some ways utterly alien, foreign
			* Exploded commentary
			* Stretching the boundaries of grammar. Language and the grammar of creation.
		- Multivalent
			* Different narrative modes (different maps) -- already discussed.
		- Transformative
		- Scattered (not intrinsically organized)
			* Size and scope -- number of words, Tablets, etc.
			* Need to be systematic in approach to study

**Day 4, Morning and afternoon: Religion reborn and the circle of being**

* The changeless faith of God
	+ Re-frame the context: a concept of religion which is consistent with modernity We are in a period of accelerating change, a transition. Threshold of maturity.
	+ Behind the change, what is remaining the same?
	+ The “paradox” of a “changeless faith” which is ever evolving.
	+ A journey back in time
		- The law of love as eternal constant
		- Why love? Why unity? Bringing things together releases higher potential.
		- “So powerful is the light of unity”
		- Expanding consciousness as product of love
		- UHJ on religion as consciousness
	+ Other ways of conceptualizing “religion”
	+ Yesterday: “essential relationships”. Permeates life. No separation between “secular” and “sacred”.
	+ Navajo: no word for religion-- But life is permeated by it.
	+ Religion vs. “Movement” or “Faith” (Abdu’l-Baha & Shoghi Effendi)
* The “divine philosophy” of Abdu’l-Baha: The Great Chain of Being renewed: The “Circle of Existence” and “dynamic hierarchy”
	+ The concept of emanation
	+ Arcs of ascent and descent; the ouroborus
	+ Different than past formulations: does not preserve hierarchies but is in continual motion.
	+ Expresses the “love of God for own essence” -- dynamic self-consciousness
	+ Encompasses physical as well as social and spiritual evolution -- seamless process.
	+ Universal “Axial” narrative: Ascending degrees of consciousness
	+ “We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.” (Sagan) + “he hath known God who hath known himself” (Hadith)
* Consequences of the “circle of existence”: a few thoughts
	+ Interconnectedness - necessary relationships
	+ Resolution to collapse of two-story structure
		- To the vegetable, the animal is spirit
	+ Relativity, symmetry, complementarity (direction of view), invariance
		- Each of these manifested on the circle of being.
		- Invariance:
			* 1. Correspondence principle spirit-matter
			* 2. Lawh-i-Haqq-i-Nas: infinite replication of correspondence
	+ The metaphorical nature of physical reality
		- The point is that it is an illusion *with reference to the level above*. Hierarchical picture.
	+ Zoom in: looks like a straight line of progress. Both cyclical and linear time.
		- Progress “an expression of spirit in the world of matter”.
	+ Simultaneous solution to science and religion conflict and religious diversity
		- Eliminating “two causal chains”
		- Unity of science and religion
	+ “manifest spirituality” and the Lawh-i-’Ammih
		- Spirituality not a “hidden bank account” (a consequence of substance dualism)
		- Direct correlation between inner state and outward bearing/action
	+ Oneness of being
		- One reality and one essence
		- Spiritual transformation and individual experience: In higher stages, multiplicity dissolves into unity
		- Seven Valleys, “all songs are from the King”
		- Self-annihilation (soul as divine self-disclosure)
		- Sophie’s world - we are a story in the mind of the author. “God’s love for His own essence” – the “fourth pathway of love” (Paris Talks)