

'Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity: An interview with Pasteur Monnier on the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity, Paris

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See also introduction: ['Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity: Introduction](#)

*Pasteur Monnier:*³ We are very happy to find amongst us one who has come on the part of God, and has brought to us a divine message.

'Abdu'l-Bahá: One endowed with the power of hearing shall hear the mysteries of God from all things, and all creation will convey to him the divine message.

Pasteur Monnier: If you permit us, we would like to ask a question: As we are students of theology, and in the rank of clergy, we would like to know your belief about Christ; who he was and what he was?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: Our belief in regard to Christ is exactly what is recorded in the New Testament; however, we elucidate this matter and do not speak literally or in a manner based merely on blind belief. For instance, it is recorded in the Gospel of St. John, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." The Christians accept these assertions on mere hearing, but we give an explanation which is accepted by reason, an explanation that no one need find occasion to reject.

The Christians have made this statement the foundation of the trinity, but philosophers deny it, stating that the trinity is impossible; and, in turn, the Christians do not give a satisfactory explanation and interpretation that can be accepted by the philosophers, as this matter is only based on semantics and belief; the latter do not accept it, saying, "Is it possible to have three in one and one in three?"

We explain this subject as follows: This priority and pre-existence is not in time for, if this priority were in time, the Word would become contingent on time not eternal and changeless. The world of existent beings is like the letters and all human beings as individual letters, a letter individually has no meaning, no independent significance, but the station of Christ is the station of the word, which has a completely self-sufficient and independent meaning. That is why we say Christ is the word. By complete significance we mean that the bounties of divine perfections are manifest in Christ. It is obvious that the perfections of souls other than Christ are partial and are not derived from themselves but from another, but the perfections of the Christ are universal, or the whole. The Reality of Christ possesses complete and self-sufficient perfections.

For example, this lamp sheds light, the moon also illumines the night with its silvery beams, but their light is not self created, they receive their light from another source; but Christ is like unto

the sun; his light issued forth from his own identity. He has not received it through another person, therefore we give him the comprehensive title of the "word". That is an all-comprehending reality having all perfections. This word has a priority in honour and rank, and not a beginning in time. For instance, we say, this person has precedence over all. This precedence comes to him through the station and honour which he now holds in life, but it is not a precedence in time. In reality the "word" has neither a beginning nor ending. It means those perfections which appeared in Christ and not his physical body. Those perfections were from God. It is similar to the rays of the sun which are reflected in a clear mirror. The perfections of Christ were effulgent from God. It is evident that these qualities were ever with God, even at this time they are with him, they are inseparable from him, because divinity is not subject to division. Division is a sign of imperfection, and God is the perfect one.

It is clear that the perfections of divinity are co-equal and co-existent with the essence. In that station there is absolute unity. This in brief is the exposition of the station of Christ. We do not postulate three hypostases in the Essence of Divinity by merely asserting that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was Christ. Rather we elaborate it.

Pasteur Monnier: What is the similarity between the Cause of Christ and that of Bahá'u'lláh? And what relation do they hold towards each other?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: The foundation of the religion of God is one. The same basis which was laid by Christ, and later on was forgotten, has been renewed by Bahá'u'lláh. Each divine revelation is divided into two parts. The first part is essential, and belongs to the world of morality. It is the exposition of significances and realities. It is the expression of the love of God, the knowledge of God. This is one in all the religions, unchangeable and immutable. The second part is inessential. It belongs to practical life, to transactions and business, and changes according to the requirements of the time of each prophet.

These moral laws are the reflections on this plane of the divine laws, and they become the medium for transmuting the thought of man into his reality. The moral laws change as the horizon of man extends.

For example, during the days of Moses, the foundation and the origin of the religion of God spelled morality, and that was not changed in the Christian dispensation, but certain differences crept in through the change of the second part of the religion. For during the Mosaic period the hand of a person was cut off in punishment of a small theft; there was the law of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. This was according to the spirit of the age, but as these laws were impracticable at the time of Christ, they were abrogated. Likewise divorce had become so universal and so easily put into practice, that there remained no fixed laws of marriage, therefore Christ forbade it.

According to the exigencies of the time, Moses revealed ten laws for capital punishment. It was impossible at that time to protect the community and preserve social security without these severe measures, for the children of Israel lived in the wilderness of Tah [Sinai], and they could not protect their rights and establish safety without these severe measures. But they were not needed in the time of Christ, and were abolished. The difference in the second part of religion is

unimportant because it belongs to the customs of life only but the foundation of the religion is one, and Bahá'u'lláh has renewed that foundation.

The cause of Christ was wholly spiritual. He did not change anything save the Sabbath, certain laws of conduct, and the law of divorce.

All the sayings of Christ deal with the knowledge of God, with the oneness of the world of humanity, the moral relations between the hearts and spiritual susceptibilities. Bahá'u'lláh created these merciful sentiments in the most complete form and deposited them in the hearts of men. This is in keeping with the teachings of Christ, because it is the reality, and the reality does not change. Is it possible to say that divine unity is divisible, or the knowledge of God, the oneness of the world of humanity, universal love, and the solidarity of the human race - are they ever subject to transformation?

No, I declare by God, they are immutable, for they are the reality.

Pasteur Monnier: What is the relationship of Christ and Bahá'u'lláh with God?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: Christ said: "The Father is in me." This we must understand through logical and scientific evidences, for if we do not conform religious principles with science and reason, they do not inspire the heart with confidence and assurance.

It is said that once John of Chrysostom⁴ was walking along the seashore, thinking over the question of the trinity, trying to reconcile it with finite reason. Suddenly his attention was attracted by a boy sitting on the shore, putting water into a cup. Approaching him, he asked, "My child, what art thou doing?" "I am trying to put the sea into this cup" he answered. "How foolish art thou," John replied, "in trying to do the impossible." The child rejoined, "Thy work is stranger than mine, for thou art labouring to bring within the grasp of human intellect the conception of the trinity." And so Chrysostom understood that it was not possible to harmonise this problem with mind and reason. And yet one should bring into agreement everything to reason and science. Otherwise how could one accept it? If I say something and your mind cannot accept it how could you accept it? So we should make every matter to be in agreement with reason and science.

Let us investigate independently the reality of this matter. What is the meaning of the father and the son. How is the Father in the Son?

We say that this fatherhood and sonship are allegorical and symbolical. The Reality of the Christ is the mirror through which the Sun of Divinity has reflected. If this mirror expresses, "The light is in me" - it is sincere in its claim, therefore Jesus was truthful when he said "The Father is in me". And based on this explanation there is no need to postulate plurality or multiplicity.

The sun which is in the sky, and the sun in the mirror are one, are they not? - and yet we see there are apparently two suns.

Let us investigate reality and not follow imitations. The Jews were expecting the coming of the Messiah, lamenting day and night, saying: "O God, send to us our deliverer!" But as they walked

in the path of dogmas, rather than reality, when the Messiah appeared they denied him. Had they been investigators of reality, they would not have crucified, but would have worshipped Him instantly.

Pasteur Monnier: Is the unification of religion possible? If so, when and how and through what channel will it be realised?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: When the devotees of religion cast aside their dogmas and ritualism, the unification of religion will be in sight, and the realities of the holy books will become unveiled. In these days misunderstandings are rife, but when these misunderstandings and blind imitations are relinquished, the sun of reality shall dawn.

When in San Francisco⁵ I was invited to speak in a Jewish synagogue. I said, *"For about two thousand years, between you and the Christians, there have been friction and opposition, owing to the misunderstandings which today have blinded the eyes. You conceive that Christ was the enemy of Moses, the destroyer of the laws of the Pentateuch, the abrogator of the commandments of the Bible. When we investigate the reality we observe that Christ appeared at a time when according to your own historians, the laws of the Torah were forgotten; the foundation of religion and faith was shaken. Nebuchadnezzar had come, burnt the whole Torah, and taking into captivity many Jewish tribes. Alexander the Great came for the second time, and Titus, the Roman general, devastated the land for the third time, killed the Jews, pillaged their property and imprisoned their children.*

At such a time, under such gloomy conditions, Christ appeared. The first thing he said was: 'The Torah is the divine book; Moses is the man of God; Aaron, Solomon, Isaiah, Zechariah and all the prophets of Israel are valid and true.' Through all regions he spread the Old Testament, which for fifteen hundred years had not been sent out of Palestine, but Christ promulgated it in all countries. *Were it not for Christ the name of Moses and his book would not have reached America; for during fifteen hundred years the Torah had been translated but once. It was Christ's seal of approval which caused it to be translated into six hundred languages. Now be just, was Christ the friend or the enemy of Moses?*

You say he abrogated the Torah, but I say he promulgated the Torah, the ten commandments and all the questions which belong to its moral world. But he changed the following: That for a small theft one must cut of the hand.⁶ If a person blind another, he must be blinded, or if he breaks another's teeth, his teeth must be broken. Is it possible nowadays to establish the archaic laws of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth? Christ changed only that part of the Mosaic religion which did not accord with the spirit of his time. He had no desire to abolish the Torah.

Is it not true that the Christians believe that Moses was the High prophet of God, and the prophets of Israel were all from God, and the Torah the book of God? Has this belief of theirs harmed their religion? If you say from your heart that Christ is the word of God, then all these differences will cease. The persecutions of the last two thousand years have been on account of this fact, that you were not willing to proclaim these two words. But I hope that it is proven to you that Moses had no better friend than Christ."

Today the enmity and rivalry existing between the religions are on mere names. It is an established fact that the followers of all the religions believe in a reality, the benefits of which are universal; which reality is a medium between God and man. The Jews call that reality Moses, the Christians Christ, the Muslims Muhammad, the Buddhists Buddha, and the Zoroastrians Zoroaster. Now mark well that none of these religionists have ever seen the founders; they have only heard his name. If they overlooked these names they would realize that they all believed in a perfect reality which is an intermediary⁷ between the Almighty and the creatures.

Should you speak to a Jew about the medium or channel between God and man, without referring to any particular name or person, he would say, "Yes, this is right, but I say the name of this mediator is Moses." If you give the exposition of this divine philosophy to the followers of each religion they will agree with you in the abstract, but they will stick to the names of their own prophets, and arise in contention and strife over these names. The Jew believes in Christ, though he knows it not, and is quibbling over the mere name.

There have been wars and rumours of war amongst the people of the world for many thousand years; much innocent blood has been shed, many kingdoms and empires have been laid waste. Is it not enough?

Religion should be the means of good fellowship and love. It must upraise the standard of harmony and solidarity. If religion is conducive to hatred and enmity, its existence is harmful to the welfare of the community.

God has founded religion so that it might be the bond of amity and mutual association between the peoples. Christ did not sacrifice his life so that the people might believe the doctrine that he is the word of God;⁸ nay, rather he gave his life so that he might bestow the consciousness of eternal life to the world of humanity. That is why he said, "Jesus, the son of man, is come to give life to the world."

This reality has been forgotten by the people, and the doctrine⁹ of the father, son and holy spirit has been substituted. The original foundation has been lost sight of. Christ said, "if one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Is there any relation between this commandment and bloody events taking place today in the Balkans?

The religious differences between the Catholics and Protestants have caused a deluge of bloodshed in which 900,000 people were killed. What relation have these events with the statement of Christ when he addressed Peter: "Put thy sword into the sheath"? When we hold fast to the foundations of the religions of God, differences will be dispelled.

Pasteur Monnier: Is your aim to found a new religion?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: Our aim is to free the foundations of the religion of God from the clouds of dogmas for the sun of reality is prevented from shining forth. We desire to dispel these black impenetrable fogs, so that the regions of the world may be flooded and illumined. May these foul clouds never return, may the rays of the sun of reality encircle all countries, for the sun has not beginning in time and no ending.
(*'Abdu'l-Bahá* arose)

Pasteur Monnier: Our hope is likewise the spread of such ideals of unity, peace and concord. We hope to be your co-workers, and co-labourers in this field.

'Abdu'l-Bahá: May that unity be established between us that is not ended by separation. ('Abdu'l-Bahá went into the library, where several of the clergy; and professors sought his presence) One of them said:

"I desire to express the deepest gratitude and pleasure on the part of those present. What you have said is in truth our aim which is the establishment of universal peace and brotherhood."

'Abdu'l-Bahá: Praise be to God that our aims and hopes are one, but we must strive to make this purpose realized.

A Professor: The International Congress of Religions will be opened in Paris during the month of July.¹⁰ We hope that you will be able to accept the invitation to take part in the proceedings of that Congress.

'Abdu'l-Bahá: It is nearly two years since I left Haifa. I must return. After forty years of confinement and two years of continual travelling my powers are exhausted.

Professor: The invitation of the congress will be sent to you, and we hope you will write a message that may be read during the session.

'Abdu'l-Bahá: God willing.

End Notes

1. The version published in [Bahá'í Studies Review, 3:1](#) is a reprint of the original publication (see note 2 below) with a set of new endnotes, containing revised translations made by Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir from the original Persian which appears in the compilation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks in the West, [Khitábát](#). In the current version, edited by Arjen Bolhuis, the endnotes with revised translations and the notes within brackets by Dr. Fananapazir have been integrated into the text, replacing the original translation. Also the Persian transliteration and the phrase 'His Holiness' (Ḥaḍrat), that occurred throughout the text have been removed (cf. *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1700). This has been done to make the text more reader friendly, it does not mean this is now an authorized version.

2. Reprinted from [Abdul Baha \[sic\] on Divine Philosophy](#). Comp. Isabel F. Chamberlain. Boston: Tudor Press, 1916, [chapter V](#): "Abdul Baha Answers Many Questions asked by Theologians of Paris". The original text has been reprinted in Persian in [Khitábát](#) (Talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá). Rev. ed. Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1984, pp. 737- 747. The Universal House of Justice has written: "The fact that an original record of the interview exists indicates that it is authentic." (Letter to the Editor from the Department of the Secretariat, 16th April, 1993) Balyuzi notes that on the night of February 17th 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá "visited Pasteur Monnier's Theological Seminary and answered his questions" (*'Abdu'l- Bahá*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1971, p. 377).

The Persian starts with 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressing the interpreter, asking: "Please ask how the gentlemen are." The Bishop replies: "Praise be to God we are well and happy that you have honoured us with your visit." 'Abdu'l-Bahá responds: "I too am very happy to meet you."

3. Pasteur Henri Monnier (b. 1871) was the "Professor á la Faculté libre de théologie protestante de Paris", Vice-president of the Protestant Federation of France and Pastor of the Etoile Church (from *International Who's Who*, 1st ed.). Among his many works are "Qu'est-ce que la Bible?", "La Loi de sacrifice", and "Le Paradis socialiste et le ciel" (see *Catalogue General des Livres Imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. Vol. CXVII. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1932, pp. 5440-3).

4. John of Chrysostom (c. 344-407) was Bishop of Constantinople. The original adds that this is not John the Baptist.

5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is referring to His talk of 12 October 1912 at Temple Emmanu-El. See *Promulgation* 361-370.

6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also made the statement that Mosaic Law punished theft by amputating the hand of the offender in two talks to Jewish audiences in America (see *Promulgation* 365, 404, *Paris Talks* 142). As the Hebrew Bible does not contain this specific penalty for theft, what 'Abdu'l- Bahá calls Mosaic Law may be referring to Rabbinic tradition, the Talmud (the "Oral Torah"), which according to Jews is as important as the Torah. Alternatively, 'Abdu'l-Bahá may be using what Shoghi Effendi called His "method of exaggerated emphasis" (letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 20 February 1950) in order to make the point that Mosaic Laws were now too severe for the modern age (for a discussion of the method of exaggerated emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings, see Fazel and Fananapazir, "Some Interpretive Principles in

the Bahá'í Writings" in *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 2.1.1992, p. 8). A further possibility is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is referring to an Islamic tradition on the nature of Jewish Law. The influence of Islamic traditions is suggested by the following statement in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: BPT, 1990), "it is a fact attested by the writings of all the Islamic schools that . . . the cutting off of the right hand as punishment for theft, formed no part of Abraham's Law" (29).

7. See Galatians 3:20, 1 Timothy 2:5, Deuteronomy 5:5, and Galatians 3:19.

8. cf. "The holy, divine Manifestations did not reveal themselves for the purpose of founding a nation, sect or faction. They did not declare Their heavenly mission and message in order to lay the foundation for a religious belief. Even Christ did not become manifest that we should merely believe in Him as the Christ, follow Him and adore His mention. All these are limited in scope and requirement, whereas the reality of Christ is an unlimited essence. The infinite and unlimited Reality cannot be bounded by any limitation. Nay, rather, Christ appeared in order to illumine the world of humanity, to render the earthly world celestial, to make the human kingdom a realm of angels, to unite the hearts, to enkindle the light of love in human souls" (*Promulgation* 443).

9. Literally "the names".

10. The publication *Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy* ([chapter VI](#)) contains a five page letter from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, said to have been written from Port Said, Egypt, to "the Honorable Secretary of the Sixth International Congress of Free and Progressive Christians and other Religious Liberals". The letter contains general remarks about the nature of religion, its role in civilization, praise for positive developments in modern scientific enquiry and stresses the need for religious people to abandon unnecessary dogmas. This conference was held 16-23 July 1913 in Paris and was referred to as the "6th Congres International des libres penseurs religieux" (involving "Unitarian and other religious thinkers and workers") (noted in *Les Congres Internationaux de 1900 á 1919: Liste Complete*. Vol. II. Bruxelles: Union des Associations Internationales, 1964, p. 95).