

Thresholds of Just-Being: Deficiency, Demise, and the Ontology of Belonging

By Iman Motlagh Arani

Abstract

This article investigates the ontological spectrum of Bahá'í identity by exploring the subtle transition from full existential participation in the Faith to its deficient or residual modes. Drawing on philosophical phenomenology and existential ontology, it argues that Bahá'í belonging is not a binary condition—believer or unbeliever—but a fragile continuum shaped by varying degrees of care, orientation, and world-formation. Through the concept of *nur noch*, the paper examines how one may remain within a religious tradition not as a fully realized Bahá'í self, but as someone who merely persists in name—just still a believer—while no longer engaged in the ethical, communal, or transformative aims of the Revelation.

Rather than addressing apostasy or doctrinal rejection, the paper analyzes the erosion of lived identity: the state in which one continues to self-identify as Bahá'í yet occupies only a deficient mode of presence. Using concepts such as deficient mode, unnecessary necessity, and spiritual demise, the article develops a spectrum of Bahá'í identity—from maximal orientation and action to minimal residue and ontological hollowing. It argues that true belonging within the Bahá'í framework is defined not by formal affiliation but by participation in a shared civilizational horizon. In doing so, it redefines the Bahá'í self as an existential project whose vitality must be continually re-enacted in love, praxis, and communal presence.

1. Introduction: The Question of Belonging

What does it mean to belong?

This question becomes increasingly urgent in the context of contemporary crises of identity—religious, cultural, and existential. Modern societies, shaped by secularization, pluralism, and the collapse of traditional authority structures, no longer offer stable criteria by which individuals determine where, how, or even whether they belong. Yet even as institutional commitment declines, many continue to self-identify with religious traditions. This persistence of identification in the absence of participation raises a fundamental ontological problem: can one still meaningfully be something without enacting the structures that give that identity its form and force?

This paper addresses that question by investigating religious identity not as a fixed category or legal status, but as a mode of being. Specifically, it analyzes how religious selves can persist in residual or deficient forms—conditions in which one continues to claim affiliation but no longer inhabits the ethical, communal, or transformative aims of the tradition. In such states, identity endures in name but not in orientation. This is the existential condition marked by the German phrase *nur noch*—“only still,” or “nothing more than”—used here to describe the believer who is just still a believer: structurally present, yet no longer dynamically engaged.

The stakes of this condition are particularly high in religious frameworks like the Bahá’í Faith, where belief is not confined to private assent, but is defined through praxis—through acts of service, consultation, ethical discipline, and the pursuit of global unity. In such traditions, the line between one who believes and one who belongs is not drawn by doctrine alone, but by existential alignment with a historical horizon. To belong is not simply to affirm, but to move with; not merely to identify, but to participate in the unfolding of a divine project.

The emergence of deficient modes of Bahá’í identity, then, is not a secondary concern. It reflects a broader ontological dislocation in the age of disconnection: the growing gap between self-description and world-formation, between symbolic faith and embodied presence. This was anticipated in authoritative Bahá’í texts which describe a condition of intensifying spiritual heedlessness, leading eventually to a climactic return to foundational truths. In this light, the present moment demands a more critical and ontologically grounded understanding of what it means to be a Bahá’í.

This article takes up that task by mapping the spectrum of Bahá’í identity—from full existential engagement to residual, deficient, or demised modes of being. Using Heideggerian ontology and the concept of *nur noch*, it introduces terms such as identity erosion, spiritual demise, and unnecessary necessity to explore how belief can persist in hollowed form. Its central claim is that Bahá’í belonging unfolds across a fragile continuum—from existential engagement to symbolic inertia. one whose ontological integrity depends not on inherited affiliation, but on active orientation toward the ethical and historical aims of the Faith.

II. The Ontology of the Object: From Chair to Stool

To understand the structural conditions under which identity persists or collapses, we begin not with persons, but with objects. In his interpretation of Heidegger’s concept of death as a deficient

mode, Mark Tanzer offers a helpful illustration: a chair that has lost its back. Though it may still function for sitting, its essential structure has been altered. It is no longer properly a chair, but something lesser—a stool. Its continuity as a physical object conceals a discontinuity in functional identity. The material remains, but its classification shifts.

This example introduces a critical term: *nur noch*. In German, the phrase has two overlapping connotations:

First, it can mean “just barely”—something that persists in a minimal or borderline condition.

Second, it can mean “nothing more than”—something that survives only as a reduced version of what it once was.

In the case of objects, these meanings collapse into one another. A chair without a back is both barely a chair and nothing more than a stool. The transition is intelligible and often irreversible: once the essential structure is lost, reclassification follows. There is no ambiguity about what it is—it has become something else.

1. Identity in Objects: Structure, Function, Legibility

A chair is not merely a thing composed of materials, but a structure whose being lies in its readiness-to-hand: to support, to accommodate, to serve the seated body in a particular way. When the back is removed, what remains may still be sat upon—but the essence of “chair” has withdrawn. The unity of form and function that once disclosed it as a chair has dissolved. Its identity no longer shines forth as such. We do not deliberate this loss; we simply call it something else—a stool. The transition is immediate, unambiguous, and complete. For the being of the object is governed by external structure, visible utility, and categorical place. But such clarity vanishes the moment we turn from things to *Dasein*—from the world of formed tools to the being who forms the world.

2. Identity in *Dasein*: Persistence, Deficiency, Ambiguity

With Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*—the being for whom Being is a question—we enter an entirely different ontological register. Unlike objects, *Dasein* is defined by its relation to the world, to others, and to possibilities. Its being is shaped by temporality, care (*Sorge*), and existential projection. It does not merely exist; it exists toward.

Here, the application of *nur noch* becomes more unsettling. If a chair becomes a stool, what becomes of a self who no longer moves toward its possibilities? A person who no longer orients to the future, no longer cares, no longer lives in an authentic relation to their world?

Tanzer's crucial insight is that Dasein can persist in a deficient mode of being without ceasing to be Dasein. It is not destroyed—it is diminished. It survives its own loss of vitality. It lingers, not as a fully engaged agent, but as a hollow presence: still technically there, but no longer defined by care or projection. It is *nur noch* Dasein—nothing more than Dasein, in name alone.

This produces a subtle ontological ambiguity:

- The person is still biologically alive, perhaps even socially present.
- But something essential has been withdrawn—futuraity, care, inward alignment.
- They are no longer being toward the world, but simply existing in it.

Unlike objects, deficient Dasein cannot be reclassified by outward form. The self retains its name—but the name no longer corresponds to existential engagement. The identity persists, but it has hollowed out from within.

This ambiguity, introduced through Heidegger's analytic, becomes even more pronounced when applied to religious identity, especially in traditions like the Bahá'í Faith where the self is not defined statically, but dynamically—through orientation, action, and participation. In such frameworks, the question becomes: what is a believer who no longer believes existentially? Who affirms in name but not in direction?

That question leads us from Dasein to the believer—from hollowed existence to the *nur noch* self within a religious world.

3. Identity in the Believer: Orientation, Detachment, Just-Being

We now apply the conceptual structure of *nur noch* to a specific and theologically significant subject: the Bahá'í believer whose identity is defined not solely by assent to doctrine or institutional membership, but by participation in a world-creating praxis—service to humanity, contribution to the community, and conscious alignment with a historical vision of justice, unity,

and peace. In this tradition, belief is not an inner conviction detached from life, but an existential orientation enacted in deeds.

To be a Bahá'í is to live toward a divine horizon, to make faith visible in action. The self is not conceived as a solitary knower or ritual participant, but as one drawn into a collective process of transformation. As a foundational text states: “That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.”¹

This is not an optional virtue. It names the ontological condition of Bahá'í identity. To belong is to serve. To be is to care.

But what happens when this orientation collapses—when belief remains in name but is no longer enacted? What is the condition of one who does not reject the Faith, nor abandon its teachings, but simply no longer moves toward its aims? Who affirms doctrinal truth, perhaps attends gatherings, but no longer consults, teaches, sacrifices, or builds?

Such a person is not an apostate. They are not hostile. They may even be sincere in emotion and memory. But their existential relation to the Cause has withered. Their care has been suspended. Their service has ceased. Their alignment has been lost. They persist—but in a diminished form.

This is the *nur noch* self: just still a believer, nothing more. The self has entered a deficient mode—marked by:

- A detachment from the principle of service;
- A loss of direction, where belief no longer issues in transformation;
- A passive mode of affiliation, where faith becomes symbolic but not enacted.

Unlike the chair, whose transformation into a stool is legible, this loss is invisible. There is no ritual, no register, no public sign. The person may say all the right things and appear integrated. But ontologically, their condition has changed. They have not exited the Faith—but neither do they inhabit it.

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXX, p. 250.

In this sense, deficient belief is not another category of person—it is another mode of being. The same name now carries different weight. The soul still stands within the Covenant, but no longer walks its path.

As Shoghi Effendi put it: “There are two kinds of Bahá’ís... those whose religion is Bahá’í and those who live for the Faith.” And again: “Being a Bahá’í is essentially an inner thing, or way of life, and not dependent on fixed patterns...”²

These insights affirm the article’s central thesis: that Bahá’í identity is a spectrum, not a binary. At one end are those whose entire lives are structured by recognition and action—who arise to serve, proclaim, and transform. At the other end are those who remain by name only—whose faith survives in form, but not in force.

In this view, mere identification cannot sustain the ontological weight of belief. When orientation is lost, presence becomes residual. The believer who no longer lives their faith becomes a remainder of themselves—a *nur noch* subject: existent, but unengaged; named, but unformed; still within, yet no longer toward.

III. The Ontology of the Self: When Identity Persists Without Presence

1. The Problem of Residual Identity

Human identity—unlike that of objects—is not defined by static properties or external function. It emerges from dynamic relations: to meaning, to time, to others, and to one’s own future. When these internal structures weaken, identity does not vanish. Rather, it enters a deficient mode: a state in which one continues to exist in form, but no longer in direction. This is the domain of residual identity—the condition of a self that survives its own collapse of orientation.

This condition becomes especially legible in religious life. A person may continue to call themselves a believer, and may retain emotional or cultural attachment to a tradition, while no longer living in accordance with its imperatives. The question is not whether the label remains—but whether belief continues to organize their being-in-the-world.

² From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, 1963–1986, p. 423.

This distinction—between symbolic identification and existential alignment—is central to the concept of *nur noch*. The believer who no longer lives toward the ideals of the faith, but remains within its structure, is just still a believer: ontologically present, but directionally inert.

2. belief Without Orientation: The Nur Noch Self

The *nur noch* self is not defined by denial or defiance. They may accept doctrine, participate in rituals, or affirm the community. What is absent is not belief as content, but belief as trajectory. They no longer move toward what they profess. The teachings remain in their vocabulary but no longer form their world.

This condition is not death, but spiritual demise—a gradual erosion in which vitality is lost, though the form endures. The individual does not exit the faith; they drift within it. Their actions no longer respond to the ethical call of Revelation. Their orientation has stalled. Their identity, though structurally intact, has been internally vacated.

Faith, in such a case, becomes inert: no longer a source of meaning, obligation, or projection, but a backdrop—a memory or a cultural shell. The individual continues, but as a remnant of what they once were.

3. Death and Demise: Two Modes of Absence

a. Heidegger's Ontology of Death

Dasein, as the being for whom being is an issue, exists in such a way that it always already projects itself toward possibilities. Among these, the possibility of no-longer-being-in-the-world—death (Tod)—is fundamental. This death is not to be understood as a biological occurrence (Ableben), but as the possibility that is utterly one's own, non-relational, and not to be outstripped. In anticipating this possibility, Dasein discloses the totality of its existence as finite. Where such anticipation is evaded, Dasein does not cease to exist, but persists in a mode of inauthenticity. It is still factually there, but no longer in resolute self-disclosure. The existential structure remains, but the ownership of that structure is withdrawn.

b. Demise and the Structure of Faith

Analogously, within the existential structure of religious being, one can distinguish between the cessation of belonging and the loss of existential orientation within belonging. In the former, the self no longer comports itself in relation to the tradition as world-forming; it exits the referential totality constituted by that tradition. This is analogous to ontological death.

In the latter case, the individual continues to be affiliated—factically present within the discursive and ritual space of the tradition—but without projection toward its disclosed possibilities. Belief is no longer constitutive of worldhood; it becomes residual. The being of the believer becomes just still—*nur noch*—a believer, where the formal markers persist, but the existential disclosure is suspended.

This condition is not reducible to doctrinal deviation. It reflects a structural deficiency in the unity of recognition and action as set forth in the tradition itself. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* articulates this in ontological terms: “These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.” The severance of this unity is not merely an ethical fault; it represents a breakdown in the mode of being through which faith is enacted.

Spiritual demise, then, is not a state of non-belief, but a deficient mode of being-in-faith. It is characterized by the persistence of form without the enactment of telos. It is not externally legible. It cannot be conclusively identified by institutional categories. Its ontological status is marked by instability, the potential for collapse, and the absence of authentic projection.

Thus, spiritual death is binary—the collapse of relational worldhood. Spiritual demise is spectral—a condition in which the self remains within the structure, but no longer exists through it. It is not a negation of faith, but a failure to exist as the one who believes.

Thus: spiritual death closes the door. Spiritual demise leaves it ajar. It is the domain of the *nur noch* self—who stands within the house, yet no longer dwells; who holds the name, but no longer bears the weight; who remains, but no longer is.

4. The Ontological Standard: Twin Duties as Existential Criteria

The ontological constitution of religious being, as disclosed within the Bahá'í tradition, is grounded in the unity of two modes of comportment: recognition (ma'rifat) and obedience (ta'a). These are not sequential acts, nor merely normative injunctions; rather, they define the existential structure within which the believer is disclosed as such.

This structure is made explicit in the opening of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: "The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the second is to observe whatsoever He hath ordained... These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other."³

Recognition is not reducible to propositional assent; it is a transformation of the self's horizon. The one who recognizes does not merely know, but is reoriented. The world, from that moment, is disclosed as world-in-light-of-Revelation. This reorientation necessarily implicates praxis. The one who truly recognizes cannot but act.

Conversely, the one who acts without such recognition—whose comportment is externally aligned but inwardly unawakened—does not instantiate belief. From the standpoint of ontological structure, there is no believer where there is no recognition. The performance of religious forms in the absence of this reoriented ground constitutes a different mode of being, one not proper to faith.

Therefore, only where recognition and praxis are unified can we speak of ontological presence in the mode of belief. Fragmentation of this unity results not in a partial believer, but in a breakdown of the very structure through which belief becomes possible.

The deficient believer, then, is not one who lacks recognition, but one in whom recognition persists without enactment. This is the *nur noch* condition: belief has ceased to function as world-disclosing, though it still lingers as a designation. The self remains factually within the symbolic order, but its being-toward is no longer actualized. Orientation has withdrawn; presence is reduced to structure.

³ إِنَّ أَوَّلَ مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْعِبَادِ عِرْفَانُ مَشْرِقِ وَحْيِهِ وَمَطْلَعِ أَمْرِهِ الَّذِي كَانَ مَقَامَ نَفْسِهِ فِي عَالَمِ الْأَمْرِ وَالْخَلْقِ،....يُنْتَبِئِي لِكُلِّ نَفْسٍ أَنْ يَتَّبِعَ مَا أَمَرَ بِهِ مِنْ لَدُنِ الْمَقْصُودِ، لِأَنَّهُمَا مَعًا لَا يُقْبَلُ أَحَدُهُمَا دُونَ الْآخَرَ...

In the spectrum of Bahá'í identity, this being is neither external to the Faith nor fully realized within it. It occupies a threshold state—no longer moving, but not yet severed. The Revelation is no longer a task; it is a remnant. The self names itself as believer, but that naming no longer corresponds to ontological enactment. It is, in every structural sense, just still.

IV. The Grammar of Deficiency: Modes of Belonging

Religious identity, insofar as it discloses itself as a mode of being, cannot be understood as a binary. The distinction between belief and unbelief does not exhaust the ontological possibilities through which Dasein comports itself in relation to Revelation. Rather, what is disclosed is a spectrum of belonging—a range of existential configurations structured by varying degrees of orientation, projection, and care.

This spectrum is not descriptive, but ontological: it does not ask whether one is a believer, but how one exists as a believer. The difference is not between membership and exclusion, but between enacted presence and suspended identity.

The analytic of deficiency arises precisely here. Where praxis withdraws, where orientation collapses into inertia, the self continues to remain within the structure of faith, but no longer from out of it. It attends. It speaks. It identifies. But it no longer discloses the world in light of the Revelation. This is not non-belief. It is belief in its residual, *nur noch mode*—faith no longer as projection, but as remainder.

To understand this spectrum, one must posit its two poles: At one end stands the positively eternal mode—a state of proximity to the Manifestation so intense that the ethical thresholds themselves become destabilized. Bahá'u'lláh writes: “The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of those who are nigh unto God.”⁴

Here, identity is not only preserved but deepened; each movement of the self is called into higher accountability. Belief becomes excess, not sufficiency. Action becomes obligation not by command, but by ontological gravity. The self is in progressive nearness—a telic orientation that

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, Four Valleys, Valley of Knowledge.

does not terminate in achievement but in asymptotic approach. This is belief not as status, but as becoming. The world is structured through the Revelation.

At the other end stands deficient eternal suspension—a point at which belief no longer constitutes being, even though symbolic indicators persist. The individual may retain community ties, social identification, even formal membership. But the relation to the Manifestation has become inert. The structure is no longer animated. Revelation is no longer world-disclosing. The self is neither fully outside the Faith nor oriented within it. It is suspended at the threshold of exit.

This boundary is ontologically significant. It is not marked by institutional expulsion or verbal denial, but by the nullification of orientation. One no longer acts, no longer serves, no longer moves toward. One merely persists. The identity is not revoked—but it has ceased to unfold. The self becomes a remainder: ontologically stalled, yet not yet undone.

The *nur noch* believer, then, exists within the spectrum, but not as a stable point. This mode is structurally unstable. It demands resolution—toward reintegration or toward collapse.

The grammar of deficiency thus names a crucial existential terrain: the in-between space of the believer who has not exited, but no longer advances; who still belongs socially, but no longer exists through the Revelation; who remains—but not as one who is becoming.

1. Positive Modes: Full Presence and Existential Engagement

The being of the believer, when authentically constituted, is not given in isolated acts of assent or ritual. It is a structure of orientation through which Dasein discloses itself as belonging to a divine order. Faith, in this ontological register, is not a psychological state or an inherited label; it is a way of being-toward—the self as formed in relation to a telos that exceeds it.

In the Bahá'í dispensation, this structure is disclosed through the unity of two ontological functions: recognition (of the Manifestation as the Dayspring of Being) and obedience (as existential action). These are not separable duties, but co-constitutive dimensions of one horizon. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* opens not with command but with disclosure: “The first duty prescribed by

God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation... These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.”⁵

Recognition is not the acquisition of knowledge, but a transformation in worldhood. The Manifestation does not appear as a content within the world; rather, the world now appears through the Manifestation. Time is restructured; care is redirected. The self does not add belief to its existing framework. It becomes a being-in-response. It is now one who exists through the axis of Revelation.

Obedience, in this context, is not legal conformity. It is the externalization of this ontological turning. The ordinances of the Aqdas—prayer, fasting, purity, justice, consultation—are not auxiliary acts. They are existential inscriptions. To obey is to inhabit the form of life made possible through recognition. These laws are not imposed from without. They are the very shape of becoming. As Bahá’u’lláh affirms: “obey them with joy and gladness, for this is best for you, did ye but know.”⁶

The believer’s being is thus constituted in action that does not arise from duty but from the gravity of alignment. Where the world had once appeared as dispersed, opaque, unordered—now it discloses itself as structure, rhythm, law.

This structure is not abstract. It is embodied. Ritual praxis—obligatory prayer, invocation, fasting—functions not as reminders but as temporal anchors. These acts cyclically return the self to the center. They inscribe belonging into the lived body. They are the existential grammar of presence. The self that prays daily is not one who merely obeys—it is one who is a being in rhythm with the Manifestation’s order.

The telos of this presence is not static nearness, but movement. In the Bahá’í ontology of selfhood, the believer is not a closed unity but a teleological being—a self whose fulfillment lies beyond itself. The call to arise, to proclaim, to serve humanity is not supplementary. It is

⁵ إِنَّ أَوَّلَ مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْعِبَادِ عِرْفَانُ مَشْرِيقِ وَخَبِيهِ وَمَطْلَعُ أَمْرِهِ الَّذِي كَانَ مَقَامَ نَفْسِهِ فِي عَالَمِ الْأَمْرِ وَالْخَلْقِ، مَنْ فَازَ بِهِ قَدْ فَازَ بِكُلِّ الْخَيْرِ، وَالَّذِي مُنِعَ إِيَّاهُ مِنْ أَهْلِ الضَّلَالِ وَلَوْ يَأْتِي بِكُلِّ الْأَعْمَالِ * إِذَا فُرِئْتُمْ بِهَذَا الْمَقَامِ الْأَسْوَى وَالْأَفْقِ الْأَعْلَى يَنْبَغِي لِكُلِّ نَفْسٍ أَنْ يَتَّبِعَ مَا أَمَرَ بِهِ مِنْ لَدُنِ الْمَقْصُودِ، لِأَنَّهُمَا مَعًا لَا يُقْبَلُ أَحَدُهُمَا دُونَ الْآخَرِ، هَذَا مَا حَكَمَ بِهِ مَطْلَعُ الْإِلْهَامِ.

⁶ أَعْمَلُوا بِالرُّوحِ وَالرَّيْحَانِ، هَذَا خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ إِنْ أَنْتُمْ مَنِ الْعَارِفِينَ.

ontologically entailed by recognition. Bahá'u'lláh declares: “Whoso hath recognized Me will arise and serve Me...”

This arising is not moral activism. It is the self’s enactment of its alignment. Service is not what the believer does—it is how the believer is revealed as such.

This also determines the structure of love. Love is not inward affect; it is act. “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.”⁷ is not an appeal to feeling, but a metaphysical imperative. To love the Manifestation is to be drawn into His will, not as subordination, but as self-realization. The one who loves is already in motion. Love, here, is an ontological state—a being-in-closeness that expresses itself in devotion, expansion, and ethical unfolding.

In this way, the believer no longer understands the self as isolated possession. The self now appears as part of a totality—as drop within ocean, as member within body. The self does not merely obey the law; it sees itself within the law. This is not submission, but the reconstitution of identity within the cosmic form of the Cause.

Faith is not internal conviction; it is enactment. It is the structural integration of the self into a revealed world. The believer is not the one who believes, but the one who becomes through belief.

In ontological summary, full presence entails the following constitutive dimensions:

- **Recognition as world-disclosure:** the Manifestation is not an object of knowledge, but the center of reorientation.
- **Obedience as actualization:** law is not external constraint, but the grammar of the self’s unfolding.
- **Love as ontological nearness:** not emotion, but movement; not sentiment, but enacting proximity.
- **Service and proclamation as existential teleology:** the self discloses itself as believer only in arising.

⁷ أَنْ اَعْمَلُوا حُدُودِي حُبًّا لِحَمَالِي

- **Embodied rhythm as temporal alignment:** faith inscribes itself in time, ritual, and body.

To dwell in this mode is not to possess faith, but to exist as one who is faith-disclosive. The believer, here, does not simply belong. They are the one through whom Revelation becomes visible. “Know, moreover, that should one who hath attained unto these stations and embarked upon these journeys fall prey to pride and vainglory, he would at that very moment come to naught and return to the first step without realizing it.”⁸

2. Deficient Modes: Withdrawal Without Rupture

In contrast to full existential engagement, deficient modes of belonging mark a condition in which religious identity remains intact in appearance but has lost its interior vitality. There is no rupture—no formal disaffiliation or visible rejection. Yet what has disappeared is the ontological tension that once animated belief: the lived integration of recognition, action, and selfhood.

The individual still claims identity, but no longer configures their being in relation to the Revelation. Their faith no longer directs them forward—it only contains them. They no longer move toward the aims of the Cause; they simply remain within its symbolic perimeter. They persist, but only as *nur noch*—just still a believer, absent of momentum or inner necessity.

This is the *nur noch* condition in its most subtle and spiritually dangerous form: a believer without striving, a name without depth, a presence stripped of direction.

Three Primary Forms of Erosion

The ontological withdrawal of faith as world-disclosing horizon reveals itself not as sudden collapse, but as a gradual erosion. This process unfolds across three interrelated domains, each corresponding to a dimension of Dasein’s being-in-the-world:

- **Erosion of love and Recognition** The erosion of love, when traced ontologically, cannot be confined to the loss of affective intensity. More primordial is the erosion of recognition—the self’s original turning-toward the Manifestation as the disclosed ground

⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*

of Being and history. This erosion manifests not in rejection, but in flattening. The Manifestation is no longer approached as the Dayspring of Revelation, as the one through whom the world is made intelligible. Rather, the self now comports toward Him as a figure of wisdom, a moral teacher, or a culturally inherited symbol. The relation has become instrumental or ancestral. In this deficient comportment, belief is not appropriated—it is transmitted. The self remains within the framework of faith because others once did. It has not undergone investigation of truth (taḥarri ḥaḳīqat)—but has accepted belief as inherited structure. Recognition, once an existential reorientation, now becomes a placeholder. The Manifestation is “believed in,” but not encountered. This is not disbelief. It is the absence of existential urgency. The believer may affirm the teachings as socially beneficial, or emotionally resonant. But the self has not stood before the Manifestation in the moment of turning. It has not seen itself reconfigured by the truth of that encounter. In this mode, love no longer structures care. It becomes polite regard, detached admiration, or vague reverence. The heart no longer turns. It coexists. The Manifestation is no longer the axis of Being, but a figure one respects—at a distance. Here, theology has not ended in denial. It has ended in familiarity. Revelation no longer ruptures the self; it is domesticated. The believer remains—but without the ontological demand of proximity. The world is not opened through the Manifestation; it is managed alongside Him. This is the end of theology not as apostasy, but as ontological dullness. The self no longer projects toward transformation. It persists within tradition without being constituted by it. It does not resist Revelation. It simply ceases to be restructured by it.

- **Erosion of action** marks the deactivation of praxis. The believer continues factically within the structure of law—perhaps attending, perhaps reciting—but the enacting of Revelation as task has ceased. Religious acts no longer disclose a world; they are no longer existentially appropriated. They become available as background.
- **Erosion of belief** completes the triad: the ontological content of faith is retained only as semantic residue. The name persists; the structure remains; but belief no longer constitutes a mode of being. The world is no longer seen in light of Revelation. The self speaks belief, but does not live it as horizon.

In all three cases, what emerges is the same ontological pattern: continuity of form without dynamism of direction—presence without projection, identification without transformation.

Minimal and Maximal Modes of Faith

These modes do not constitute typologies of individuals, but existential modalities within which Dasein configures its relation to the divine order. In the minimal mode, faith is retained structurally but not actualized in orientation. Identity is preserved at the level of affiliation; praxis is episodic or absent; Revelation functions as symbolic inheritance rather than as disclosive ground.

In the maximal mode, faith constitutes the totality of Dasein's self-understanding. The world is interpreted through the ontological lens of Revelation. Possibility is no longer open-ended but directed. Here, identity is not added to life—it is how life unfolds. Time, speech, and action are bound to the telos of divine purpose.

These modalities are fluid. Dasein moves between them across its temporal unfolding. The ontological danger, however, lies in the stabilization of the minimal: when deficient modes are normalized, when symbolic continuity is mistaken for existential presence, and when faith persists without disclosing.

Contraction and Expansion of Presence

This Underlying the movement between these modes is a more fundamental polarity: the contraction and expansion of Dasein's being-in-relation-to-Revelation.

- In expansion, the self exists as ecstatically stretched. It proclaims, serves, and builds—not as extrinsic acts, but as necessary disclosures of its being-toward the Cause. Revelation constitutes the space of its intelligibility. Care becomes outward-directed; time is ordered by the eschatological task.
- In contraction, this relation collapses inward. The self is no longer in movement toward the Manifestation. Revelation no longer structures worldhood; it is retained only as memory or symbol. Praxis, if it occurs, is disconnected from projection. The self retreats

from responsibility; it no longer acts from the horizon of divine order but from routine, fatigue, or alienation.

This contraction is not reducible to intention. It is a mode of falling (*Verfallen*), a way in which the self becomes distanced from its ownmost possibility while remaining factually within the framework of belief. The believer continues—but no longer as one who dwells in the unfolding of Revelation. They remain within, but no longer move toward. The Cause is no longer a world. It is only a form.

3. Unnecessary Necessity and the Corpse of Faith

To bring into view the fragile and ambiguous condition of deficient religious identity, it is necessary to return to a central ontological distinction in Heidegger's analytic: that between necessary necessity and unnecessary necessity. This distinction—further developed in Tanzer's interpretation of *Dasein*—illuminates how a being can continue to exist as something (e.g., “a believer”) even after the existential structures that originally constituted that identity have disintegrated.

A necessary necessity defines those structural features without which a particular identity collapses. In such a structure, loss is equivalent to ontological reclassification. If a chair loses its back, it no longer fulfills the functional whole through which “chair” discloses itself—it becomes a stool. The object persists factually, but its being is transformed. In this case, identity is defined through rigid external form: it is a system of conditions that admit no internal fragmentation.

Religious identity, by contrast, is not constituted through such externally visible function. Its structure is more porous, temporally unstable, and interior in constitution. Heidegger's framework allows us to see that existential identities—unlike objects—can persist even after their inner orientation has collapsed. Such identities do not vanish immediately upon the erosion of form; they continue in what Heidegger terms deficient modes of being. These are supported by unnecessary necessities: structural features necessary not for factual persistence, but for authentic projection and disclosure.

In this context, the believer may cease to pray, detach from the moral imperative, discontinue acts of service, and become existentially indifferent to the Revelation—yet continue to remain within the symbolic classification of the Faith. The name persists. The category is retained. But the self's being-in-the-world is no longer animated by the force of belief. The result is a hollowed mode of existence, what Tanzer describes as: "Dasein can lack its identity and still be itself... maintaining itself in a deficient mode."

This is the existential space in which faith becomes residue. The condition is not constituted by opposition or doctrinal denial, but by ontological suspension. The individual no longer lives faith as projection; they now carry it as residue. Belief no longer organizes perception or discloses worldhood; it merely lingers in form.

The apt metaphor here is not death (non-being), but corpse. A corpse is not nothing—it retains structure, form, and recognition. But the animating horizon of life is absent. In Heidegger's terms, such a being is *nur noch vorhanden*—"only still there." The being persists factually, but no longer discloses itself as world-forming. Its being has lost directionality.

So it is with the deficient believer: the external structure remains—ritual, affiliation, identification—but the internal axis of projection, care, and responsibility has collapsed. The Revelation no longer constitutes a horizon for being. It becomes background, held not through enacted disclosure but through cultural inertia. The self becomes a carrier of what once disclosed it.

This is the precise ontological meaning of unnecessary necessity: the self continues to exist even after the collapse of that which gave it ontological coherence. Yet this continuation is not stable. It is precarious, because it requires the maintenance of identity without renewal. As Tanzer observes, such a being "must always maintain that identity... it is always on the way to being itself." In the religious context, this means that the deficient believer is locked in an effort without direction—a repetition of gestures that no longer derive from disclosure.

The result is existential exhaustion: a condition in which the self erodes into symbol. It remains, but not as a site of presence. It is no longer belief-in-motion, but symbolic inertia. The outer form

continues—the rituals may still be performed—but the inner dynamic has receded. What was once being-in-faith becomes being-alongside-faith.

The *nur noch* condition is inherently unstable; it leans either toward renewal or collapse. It does not resolve into presence, nor fall into absence. It hovers between—a suspended negation. This is survival after interior collapse, presence after loss of meaning. Tanzer names this paradox: “Dasein is just barely itself, but its survival counts as a loss because it is just not-itself and nothing more.”

Yet within this fragile structure remains the possibility of reactivation. Because the identity has not yet decomposed—because the symbolic frame remains intact—the potential for reanimation persists. The *nur noch* self is not annihilated. It is dormant. The corpse of faith is not void. It is a structure awaiting breath.

This is the paradoxical potential of deficiency: that what remains as trace may still become trajectory. The condition is not terminal unless it is mistaken for final. The believer in this mode may still turn—not by effort alone, but through renewed orientation. The ontological minimum retains within itself the possibility of resurrection. “the end of all things is unknown. How many souls are there who do not believe today, yet the day will come when they attain faith and become the source of great services. And how many souls are there who believe now, yet at the end of their lives fall heedless of the Truth.”⁹

V. The Hidden Crisis: Deficiency as a Theological Problem

The Deficient belonging is not to be grasped as a merely episodic lapse or isolated deviation. It discloses a deeper and more pervasive rupture—ontological and theological—wherein the internal coherence of religious existence begins to unravel. The loss here is not only personal but structural. What collapses is the very possibility for the community to continue as a world-forming whole. The hollowing of individual presence becomes the hollowing of a shared horizon.

⁹ مانبايد خود را بپسنديم بلکه سايرين را بهتر بدانيم حتّی نفوسی که مؤمن نیستند زیرا حسن خاتمه مجهول است . چه بسیار نفوسی که حال مؤمن نیستند و روزی بپايد که ايمان آورند و مصدر خدمات عظيمه شوند و چه بسیار نفوسی که حال ايمان دارند ولی در آخر حیات غافل از حقّ گردند.

In this condition, a fundamental disjunction emerges between naming and being. Individuals continue to speak the name of belief, to claim the identity of “Bahá’í,” while no longer projecting themselves within the ethical, spiritual, and teleological structure of the Faith. The body of religion persists; its soul—the imperative of world transformation—is withdrawn. In this disjunction, the limits of theology grounded in external markers become visible. What is lost is orientation toward.

This disjointedness is not new. It has already been thematized within the tradition. Shoghi Effendi names it plainly: “There are two kinds of Bahá’ís... those whose religion is Bahá’í and those who live for the Faith.”

The distinction is not one of category, but of ontological status. The former remains attached to the signifier; the latter lives in projection, care, and transformation. The former remains in form; the latter in motion. This is not a matter of sincerity. It is a matter of existential difference: the difference between being-within and being-toward.

This distinction echoes the very grammar of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, where identity is not defined by belief alone nor by act alone, but by the structural unity of recognition and obedience. Where this unity breaks down, identity becomes residual—a name without nearness, a law without love, a structure without striving.

The danger intensifies when this deficient presence is normalized—when the *nur noch* mode becomes the unconscious horizon of the community. What follows is not heresy or rebellion, but spiritual entropy: the preservation of visible structure alongside the erosion of existential weight. When form persists without force, the sacred world loses its capacity to shape time and self.

The Universal House of Justice, too, signals this displacement when it writes: “Being a Bahá’í is essentially an inner thing, or way of life... not dependent on fixed patterns.”

But when fixed patterns endure without inward motion, theology itself loses traction. It no longer orients. It ritualizes. It circulates without generating transformation. What appears as continuity is in fact drift.

This is not a superficial inconsistency. It reveals a contradiction within the theological project itself: for a religion whose essence is the transformation of the self and the world, the stabilization of symbolic belief without action is not sustainable. The Aqdas is unequivocal:

“These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.”

Here, the problem is not mere imperfection. It is ontological incompleteness. The believer who recognizes without acting fails to actualize the very structure by which belief becomes a world. Their being-in-faith is not whole. They remain, but not as projective selfhood. They are, ontologically, **in suspension**.

This crisis reverberates into the institutional domain. For example, the deprivation of voting rights—the gravest administrative sanction—is, as Shoghi Effendi explains, a measure of last resort, reserved only for breaches that endanger the integrity of the Cause: “He considers that under no circumstances should any Bahá’í ever be suspended... for a matter which is not of the utmost gravity.”¹⁰

The principle here is not merely administrative. It reflects a deeper truth: that institutional identity, without inner alignment, cannot carry ontological weight. One may remain present administratively while having already withdrawn in existential terms. The crisis is not procedural—it is ontological. A community composed of such suspended selves begins to lose its own capacity for projection.

Thus, presence alone cannot be the bearer of identity. The Faith is not a set of categories—it is a movement. The Bahá’í community exists authentically not by name alone, but through continual becoming. Where becoming ceases, the very legitimacy of religious life weakens. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned of this condition—not as error but as danger: “The worst enemies of the Cause are in the Cause... who persistently violate every fundamental law of love and unity.”¹¹

These are not Covenant-breakers in the juridical sense. They are those whose ontological failure—failure to arise, to serve, to dwell in love—renders the structure of faith hollow. The

¹⁰ Shoghi Effendi, from a letter written on his behalf, *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1447.

¹¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *The Bahá’í World*, Vol. IX, p. 460.

collapse is not loud; it is hidden. Not dramatic, but slow. What disappears is the capacity to orient one's being within the world of the Revelation.

Yet the response cannot be surveillance. Nor can it be disciplinary closure. The problem is not transgression—it is deficiency. The deficient believer is not outside the Faith; they are collapsed within it. They do not oppose—they linger, no longer toward but only within. Their condition is one of ontological suffocation. They breathe, but without direction.

What is needed is not theological correction, but ontological renewal. The task is not to enforce norms, but to restore motion—to recover the link between name and nearness, between form and projection. Theological language must not only describe identity; it must orient it. Praxis must take precedence over proclamation. The axis of being must be turned again toward the horizon of transformation.

For the real crisis is not doctrinal failure. It is the proliferation of ontologically passive selves—structurally within, spiritually absent. The community is not threatened by difference, but by stagnation. Healing this rupture does not mean return to past forms. It demands the recovery of futurity—the reawakening of the horizon of becoming.

To this end, the threshold must be reconceived. Not as a line of exclusion, but as a zone of re-entry. The *nur noch* self, suspended in minimal presence, is not to be discarded. They are not dead. They are dormant. The corpse of faith, as we have seen, is not null—it is a structure awaiting breath. What remains as trace may yet be reclaimed as trajectory.

But this is only possible if the Faith is lived as movement—not as memory.

VI. Conclusion: Toward an Ethics of Renewal

This inquiry has sought to reconceive religious identity not as juridical classification or internal assent, but as a mode of being—a structure of orientation, care, and world-disclosure. Within this analytic, belonging is not a fixed condition. It is a spectrum: a gradation of existential proximity to the Revelation, ranging from enacted faith to residual form, from projective motion to symbolic inertia.

At the unstable center of this spectrum stands the deficient self—the *nur noch* identity. This self has not exited the tradition; it remains factically inside. Yet its faith no longer configures its being-in-the-world. In the *nur noch* condition, identity persists in name alone, absent of motion

or existential direction. Belief, here, is no longer projected; it is carried. The *nur noch* self utters faith, but no longer lives it as becoming.

This condition is not reducible to disobedience or moral failure. It signals a broader ontological displacement—a historical weakening of the link between naming and becoming, between theological form and existential orientation. In such conditions, the Faith risks becoming symbolic residue: a vocabulary inherited but no longer inhabited. Its grammar survives, but its reality recedes.

Yet precisely because the *nur noch* condition is neither denial nor fulfillment, it remains ontologically open. The structure has not decomposed. The name has not collapsed. The horizon remains accessible. What is required is not restoration of external form, but reanimation of directionality—the return of faith as world-disclosing movement. The corpse of belief is not nullified; it is suspended. It waits for breath.

The demand, therefore, is not for correction but for reorientation. Not for reimposing boundaries, but for restoring existential motion. Renewal does not arise from enforcement; it arises from the reawakening of praxis as identity. The believer becomes again when they turn—toward service, consultation, and the shared teleology of the Cause.

This is not merely a pastoral or institutional concern. It is a theological imperative. In a dispensation in which identity is structured through recognition and action, neither suffices alone. The community, therefore, cannot be understood as a space of affiliation, but as a field of becoming—a movement unfolding in time, not a structure inherited from the past.

To belong, then, is not to remain. It is to strive. The Bahá'í self is not a possession. It is a projective form of life—an identity disclosed only through its motion. Not through what it believes in theory, but through what it enacts: in justice, in unity, in the historical realization of peace.

To reawaken this movement is the moral and ontological task of the present. It is the shift from just-being to being-with—with others, with the Revelation, with the unfinished demands of history. Only in this movement does belief recover its world-forming depth. Only here does faith cease to be memory—and become again becoming.

Next Inquiry: Toward an Ethics After Theology

The analysis advanced here has outlined the ontological instability of residual belief. But the implications of this structure extend beyond selfhood. They lead directly into the domain of ethics.

If belonging is constituted not in possession but in motion, then ethical life cannot be grounded in fixed doctrine or abstract duty. It must emerge through response to the Other, through the lived encounter with alterity, with suffering, with the unfinished.

This will be the subject of the next inquiry: “Beyond Totality: Bahá’í Ethics and the Prophetic Epistemology of the Other.”

There, we will turn from ontology to ethical relation—from the static logic of rule to the dynamic call of responsibility. Drawing on Levinas’s concept of the infinite demand of the Other, and in dialogue with the Bahá’í principle of unity-in-difference, we will ask:

How can ethics arise where theology ends?

And more urgently: What kind of moral self must one become to live Revelation not as possession, but as answerability?

The path ahead is not closed. It begins where totality is interrupted—where the call of the Other breaks open the self’s enclosure. From that break, a new ethic may yet emerge.

References

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. Translated by Marzieh Gail. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.
- Motlagh Arani, Iman. “The End of Theology and the Role of Religion in Society-Building.” Unpublished manuscript, 2024.
- Motlagh Arani, Iman. “The Bahá’í Praxis: Translating Theology into Social Action.” Unpublished manuscript, 2024.
- Shoghi Effendi. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File*. Compiled by Helen Hornby. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996.
- Tanzer, Mark. “Heidegger on Death as a Deficient Mode.” *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 19 (2021): 177–202.
- The Universal House of Justice. *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963–1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996.
- *The Bahá’í World*, Vol. IX. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1940.