

**Conversion, Transformation, and Sacrifice
in the Revelation of the Báb**

"Rediscovering the Dawnbreakers: the Báb and the Bábí Movement"

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by Peter B. Ashelman in Tokyo, Japan

Peter@Ashelman.Net

Introduction

What was the essential dynamic of history released by the Bábí or Dawn-breaker Era in Persia and the Near East in the 1840s? This question relates to my struggle to relate the Bábí legacy effectively to a situations of extreme spiritual testing. Perhaps we can draw on the heroic courage of those Spiritual Warriors who faithfully encountered the Báb’s Revelation, and learn from the lesson of those who failed to take advantage of that Bounty.

At the dawn of this 21st century, the dynamic of conversion, transformation, and sacrifice unleashed by the Revelation of the Báb, is reverberating throughout the world in the Bahá’í Faith. This dynamic has profound implications for those pioneers who seek to transmit the message of spiritual transformation to what seems a world gone awry with poverty, disease, civil strife, and the alienation and insecurity of economic materialism. While this message needs to be told in every continent, at some later date I would be interested in exploring these implications for the Asian Rim peoples among whom I live. *

* As of 1998, roughly 2.9 billion people were living in the Asian Rim area [in the North and South American continents, Oceania, and the Pacific-oriented Asian (POA) countries]; in about 50 years, some three-quarter billion more will be added to this area. More than 40% of that increase is expected in South American countries, and slightly less than 40% of the increase among the POA countries, as China and Japan eventually stabilize with low or near-zero population increases, respectively. These figures are supported by the Table below. [Primedia Reference, Inc. (1998), 862-3]

Population Estimates and Projections among Asian Rim Peoples

Population Growth in Regions of the Asia-Pacific-New World over next 50 Years

Region	1998 population #	2025 pop. projected	2050 pop. projected	% Growth: 1998 - 2050	
1) North America	301.0	373.5	435.0	44.5	# pop. x 1 million
2) South America	507.5	695.5	813.4	60.3	Source - Census Bureau,
3) Oceania, including Australia	28.7	38.5	42.8	49.1	U.S. Dept. of Commerce
4) Asia Pacific Oriented (APO)	2036.4	2308.1	2323.9	14.1	in <i>The World Almanac</i>
Pacific Rim SUM (1 - 4)	2873.6	3415.6	3615.1	25.8	and <i>Book of Facts 1999</i>
People's Republic of China	1236.9	1407.7	1322.4	6.9	Primedia Reference Inc.,
Asia, all countries	3628.0	4703.0	5328.0	46.9	1998 (see Bibliography)
[APO (4) excludes both former Soviet Union countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Uzbekistan); and the Asian countries NOT oriented to the Pacific Ocean, e.g. India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, etc. Included: Thailand, Indonesia, etc.]					

For most people throughout the world, the story of the Báb's supreme sacrifice remains untold. This story has tremendous implications for humanity, I believe, both for the speedy realization of individual human potential, and for the collective expression of a new civilization capable eventually of harmonizing myriads of ancient and modern traditions. It would be a blessing if I could breathe something of the spirit of the Persian Dawn-breakers, and convey that spirit to my struggling brothers and sisters, lest we are engulfed by the terrible conflicts and sufferings, personal and collective, while floating adrift, rudderless, in a sea of western or oriental materialism.

Indeed, once the story is told, "Every soul is challenged to look at [the Báb's] writings and perceive the fragrance of His Beloved - and to prove that perception by its transformative influence upon his soul." [Velasco (2001)] The pathos and beauty of this challenge have just been revealed to all humanity at the marvelous public opening of the Terraces leading to the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel:

The sufferings sustained by the Báb so as to arouse humanity to the responsibilities of its coming age of maturity were themselves indications of the intensity of the struggle necessary for the world's people to pass through the age of humanity's collective adolescence. Paradoxical as it may seem, this is a source of hope. The turmoil and crises of our time underlie a momentous transition in human affairs. Simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration have clearly been accelerating throughout the planet since the Báb appeared in Persia. That our earth has contracted into a neighbour-hood, no one can seriously deny. The world is being made new. Death pangs are yielding to birth pangs. The pain shall pass when members of the human race act upon the common recognition of their essential oneness. There is a light at the end of this tunnel of change beckoning humanity to the goal destined for it according to the testimonies recorded in all the Holy Books. [UHJ (2001b), paragraph 4]

This paper contains two main Sections: (1) Scope, Interpretation, and Historical Perspective, focusing on both hermeneutics – the discipline of interpreting truth revealed in sacred scriptures – and the historical evolution of the world Bahá'í community since its origins among the early Dawn-breakers; and (2) the "Reality of Conversion, Transformation, and Sacrifice" in the Bábí Dispensation.

Thanks go to my mentor for this study, Ismael Velasco, and to the other learned Wilmette Institute faculty who inspired and facilitated my immersion in serious scholarship to prepare for teaching work..

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Section 1 - Scope, Interpretation, and Historical Perspective

Concerning *Scope*, we lay out in this Section 1 the interpretive approach and historical perspective brought to this inquiry. Section 2 describes some key passages of the sacred writings of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad (1819-50), known as the “Báb” (meaning “Gate” or “Door”), related to our theme. It alludes to only a few aspects of Bábí history, the movement in Persia and Iraq revolving around the Báb’s brief dispensation (1844-1863).

As to *Interpretation* of sacred scripture, or hermeneutics, Bahá’ís – followers of Bahá’u’lláh – acknowledge the Báb’s station as that divine Revelator who prepared humanity to recognize Bahá’u’lláh as prophet-founder of the emerging global religion. We thus draw upon the unique and authoritative elucidation of the Báb’s Writings available both in the vast Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh and in the two divinely-inspired, infallible Interpreters of Revelation that flowed from Bahá’u’lláh’s Being, both being His biological and spiritual descendents – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

To deal with modern issues that are not treated in Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation or its Interpretation, we call on the legislative decisions and pronouncements of the Universal House of Justice (UHJ), the supreme body uniquely endowed with infallible guidance to direct the affairs of the worldwide Bahá’í community. This guidance includes how to approach Bahá’í scholarship. [Bahá’í World Centre (1993)]

To acknowledge the authority and begin to grasp the significance of the Writings of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, one must realize that these twin Revelators see “with the eye of God,” and in so doing, convey and interpret God’s Creative Word with the freedom that comes from the authority of absolute submission. Several scholars [e.g. Cole (1995); Sours (1991)] relate interpretation to theology.

In Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings there is no single method of interpretation, such as allegorical, symbolical, typological, or literal, that is used exclusively for the understanding of any major category of Scripture, be it prophecy, historical narratives, or general explanatory texts.... [Bahá’u’lláh’s] approach suggests that the very belief that

the Word of God is eternal suggests that it must have an archetypal nature that is always applicable to each age and/or the experience of the individual seeker. This seems to indicate that the spiritual meaning and value of revealed texts is never bound by the dimensions of any one time or place and hence its truth can never be adequately evaluated or understood by historical criteria or material sciences. [Sours (1991) 31, 37]

Our understanding of the sacred writings acknowledges “the importance of a balance between literal and metaphorical approaches, and the vital role of the authorized interpretations” [Fazel and Fananapazir (1992)] of Bahá’u’lláh’s son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844-1921) and the latter’s grandson *Shoghi Effendi* (1897-1957) in their respective roles as Center of the Covenant and Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith. See their biographies. [Balyuzi (1971); Rabbání (1969)] * Thus, we draw on these two authoritative Figures to understand the significance of both sacred scriptures and of Bábí and Bahá’í history for modern times. Our view of interpretive authority, individual freedom, and obedience in the Bahá’í context is clearly stated [Semple (1984), (1991)], especially as it relates to the role of Shoghi Effendi as Interpreter of sacred writings, and after him, the Universal House of Justice as Legislator on matters not covered in those writings. Several Bahá’í scholars, acknowledging that secular (or Christian or Muslim) critics of Bahá’í historiography exist, explain the Bahá’í approach interpreting history and offer rebuttals. [Momen (1993), and page 15 below; Hatcher; Bahá’í Academics (2001)]

Regarding *Historical Perspective*, the purpose of the Word of God and its interpretation, according to the Bahá’í view, is to call creation into being. As seen in the matchless writing of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian’s role is to nurture the life and institutions of Bahá’í community and thus promote “an ever-advancing civilization.” [Mitchell (1997a), (1997b)] Consonant with the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, and the authoritative interpretation and guidance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ and Shoghi Effendi, Bahá’ís see the modern dynamics of history as processes evolving from the Báb’s Revelation itself. Writing about Himself, the Báb declared in an Epistle to Muhammad Sháh, Ruler of Persia,

* Phelps (1912) is a good supplementary secondary source when used with care, but the original editions are also riddled with inaccuracies. The Kalimat Press 1985 edition avoids these while preserving the accurate testimony of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sister.

I am one of the sustaining pillars of the Primal Word of God... God hath ordained that all the good things which lie in the treasury of His knowledge shall be attained through obedience unto Me, and every fire recorded in His Book, through disobedience unto Me.... I am the Primal Point from which have been generated all created things. [Báb, (1976) 11, 12]

Bahá'í interpretation is that the Báb, in fulfilment of Judaeo-Christian and Islamic prophecy, ushered in a new cycle of fulfilment on earth. Interpreting the Bible's *Book of Revelation* (chapter 11, verse 15),

And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever,

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this coming fulfilment as the "Spiritual and Divine Kingdom" and "day of God."

The seventh angel is a man qualified with heavenly attributes, who will arise with heavenly qualities and character. Voices will be raised, so that the appearance of the Divine Manifestation will be proclaimed and diffused. In the day of the manifestation of the Lord of Hosts, and at the epoch of the divine cycle of the Omnipotent which is promised and mentioned in all the books and writings of the Prophets--in that day of God, the Spiritual and Divine Kingdom will be established, and the world will be renewed; a new spirit will be breathed into the body of creation; the season of the divine spring will come; the clouds of mercy will rain; the sun of reality will shine; the life-giving breeze will blow; the world of humanity will wear a new garment; the surface of the earth will be a sublime paradise; mankind will be educated; wars, disputes, quarrels and malignity will disappear; and truthfulness, righteousness, peace and the worship of God will appear; union, love and brotherhood will surround the world; and God will rule for evermore--meaning that the Spiritual and Everlasting Kingdom will be established. Such is the day of God. For all the days which have come and gone were the days of Abraham, Moses and Christ, or of the other Prophets; but this day is the day of God, for the Sun of Reality will arise in it with the utmost warmth and splendor. [Abdu'l-Bahá (1990), 56-57]

'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly envisioned humanity's perfections in a "Divine Civilization" [(1875)], and issued to North American Believers [(1916-17)] practical directives toward attaining that Civilization.

Yet how, one asks, can human behavior possibly be transformed to such an extent, in effect toward

"Paradise"? Such a transformation is foreshadowed in the suffering of the Báb, as indicated in the

Introduction, and in the heroic response of His followers who gave their lives in accepting God's charge,

first announced to the Báb.

Deliver the summons of the most exalted Word unto the handmaids among Thy kindred, caution them against the Most Great Fire and announce unto them the joyful tidings that following this mighty Covenant there shall be everlasting reunion with God in the Paradise of His good-pleasure, nigh unto the Seat of Holiness. [Báb (1976), 52]

This "Covenant" is regarded by Bahá'ís as God's promise to achieve the age-old hope for peace and abiding human fellowship. The collective response to this promise among Bahá'ís, attempting to mirror

the exemplary life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’, the Center of the Covenant, constitutes the beginning of an embryonic transformation of human history, now only in its Formative Age, toward that “day of God.”

The period from the Báb’s first Declaration of His Station in 1844 to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing in 1921 called “the Heroic, the Primitive, the Apostolic Age of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh,” [Shoghi Effendi (1944), xiii] is comprised of three “Epochs” associated with the three Central Figures of the Faith (the two Revelators and the Center of the Covenant). Under the Guardianship (1921-1957) of Shoghi Effendi, the Bahá’í Faith entered into its Formative Age, which is now, as of April 2001, in its Fifth Epoch.

“Epoch” is a term used by the Beloved Guardian [Shoghi Effendi] to describe progressive stages in the evolution of the organic Baha’i community and signal the maturation of its institutions, allowing the Faith to operate at new levels and to initiate new functions. [Radpour (2001) and UHJ (1996), 710-716]

Signaling the growing maturity of the Bahá’í community and its institutions, the Universal House of Justice wrote for the occasion of this year’s annual Festival of Ridvan (April, 2001),

Abroad in our world community, there is a heightened awareness of the value of process, the necessity of planning and the virtue of systematic action in fostering growth and in developing the human resources by which expansion can be sustained and consolidation assured. The coherence of understanding about these prerequisites of progress cannot be overvalued, nor can the importance of perpetuating them through well-ordered training be overestimated. And so, the arrival of our community at such a moment of consciousness is an occasion of significance for us. We are deeply grateful to the Blessed Beauty [Bahá’u’lláh] to be able to recognize and acclaim it at the very beginning of global enterprise being launched during these festive days. [UHJ (2001a)]

The collective effort of the Bahá’í world community comes from individuals who strive to make ongoing spiritual transformation, inspired by the Dawn-breakers, both a personal and social reality. Drawing upon and sharing the resources for this transformation is the heart of the human “global enterprise.” [Bahá’ís of USA (2001)] George Townshend, in his Introduction to *The Hidden Words* of Bahá’u’lláh, has eloquently described how “the destined regeneration of the race” is to come about. [Bahá’u’lláh (1954), i - ix]

Section 2 - The Reality of Conversion, Transformation, and Sacrifice in the Bábí Dispensation

Humanity understands little of the historical reality of the conversion, transformation and sacrifice so powerfully engendered by the Báb's Revelation. The Báb and his followers were viciously persecuted (as were the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb's successor) [Winters, Jonah (1997a & b); Stockman and Winters (1997), 85-88]. After some initial notice by European observers, Bábí history has been largely ignored except by Bahá'ís and a few Western scholars. Most of the Báb's writings have been lost, said to exceed 500,000 verses in length; the Qur'án, in contrast, is 6,300 verses in length. [Stockman (2001)]

Only a small portion of the Báb's extant Writings have been translated from the Arabic or Persian into English or other widely used languages. [Stockman et al. (1997, 145-6)] Accessible texts are few [Báb (1902), (1905), (1911-14), (1976), (1980); Bahá'u'lláh, The Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1981)]; scant, too, are historical accounts close to primary sources ['Abdu'l-Bahá (1891); Abu'l-Fadl Golpáygání (1983), (1985); Nabíl-i-Zarandí (1892); Shoghi Effendi (1944)]. Recently the history of the Bábí religion has received increasing attention among Western scholars. [Stockman et al. (1997, 46-51)] Recent summaries are available on the web [Winters (1997b), chapter 3; Stockman (2001)]; a hundred-page summary of the Báb's writings in the approximate order they were composed is, I think, not yet online [MacEoin (1992)].

At this point, we must be content to explore our limited theme among a few of the Báb's utterances. We look at references in the Writings of the Báb to (1) *conversion* that comes by acknowledging His Revelation and (2) the *transformation* that comes as a function of both conversion and (3) *sacrifice*.

DEFINITIONS:

(1) Conversion – Undergoing a fundamental *paradigm shift to perceive reality in a new light*, and being confirmed in this shift by witnessing to, articulating, and testing that perception continually in the environment.

(2) Transformation – “Growing up” by finding opportunities in life's challenges or tests for *clearer expression of one's “Higher” or “True” Self*. Psychologists might see this as mastering crucial developmental tasks during the ten stages of human existence on this earthly plane. [Ashelman (2000), i]

Acceptance of Prophets or Manifestations of God as divine educators leads individuals to expand developmental tasks to higher orders of perfection than imaginable by any strictly psychological and biological theories of behavior. Collectively, transforming individuals create a “social matrix” for transformation of civilization itself. [Jordan (1968), Chapters 5 and 6]

(3) Sacrifice – Using one’s free will to let go of, or surrender identification with, attachments to and habits associated with one’s old self, in order to accept the claims of one’s new, more desirable Higher Self. Informed by a new paradigm requiring new developmental tasks of spiritual transformation, one freely submits to the claims of the Higher Self. This continuing process of spiritual submission to God – “islám” – is the great theme of the Qur’án.

A propos (1) *conversion* and (2) *transformation*, on pilgrimage to Mecca (Sept. 1844-June 1845), the Báb conveyed by his disciple Quddús an Epistle to the Sherif of Mecca, custodian of the House of God. The Báb foretold that his failure to recognize Him as God’s messenger, like Muhammad, was a “fire” that could be transformed into “light.” However, the Sherif’s response came too late.

Absorbed in his own pursuits the Sherif, however, failed to respond. Seven years later, when in the course of a conversation ... this same Sherif was informed of the circumstances attending the mission and martyrdom of the Prophet of Shíráz [the Báb], he listened attentively to the description of those events and expressed his indignation at the tragic fate that had overtaken Him.
[Shoghi Effendi (1944), 9]

Prophetically, the Báb’s Epistle to the Sherif of Mecca declared:

O Sherif! All thy life thou hast accorded worship unto Us, but when We manifested Ourselves unto thee, thou didst desist from *bearing witness* unto Our Remembrance, and from *affirming* that He is indeed the Most Exalted, the Sovereign Truth, the All-Glorious.... Verily We are cognizant of all things. Yet notwithstanding that We had called thee into being for the purpose of *attaining Our presence* in the Day of Resurrection, thou didst shut thyself out from Us without any reason or explicit Writ; whereas hadst thou been among such as are endowed with the knowledge of the Bayán, thou wouldst have, at the sight of the Book, *testified* forthwith that there is no God but Him, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, and wouldst have *affirmed* that He Who hath revealed the Qur’án, hath likewise revealed this Book, that every word of it is from God, and unto it we all bear allegiance. However, that which was preordained hath come to pass. Shouldst thou *return unto Us* while revelation still continueth through Us, *We shall transform thy fire into light*. Truly We are powerful over all things. But if thou failest in this task, thou shalt find no way open to thee other than to embrace the Cause of God and to implore that the matter of thine allegiance be brought to the attention of Him Whom God shall make manifest, that He may graciously enable thee to prosper and cause thy *fire to be transformed into light*. (Italics added)
[Báb (1976), 29-30]

The Báb declared His claim publicly at the Kaaba in Mecca, so we must assume the Sherif heard but ignored His announcement (that He was the Qá’im, the Promised One of Islám). Interestingly, the Báb says this was due to the Sherif’s ignorance of “the knowledge of the Bayán.” This could refer to the

entirety of His writings up to that point, or allude to the Persian Bayán begun in 1848 while incarcerated in the fortress of Máh-Ku in Iran's northwestern province of Ádhirbáyján. [Balyuzi (1973), 132]

The Báb claimed that His Book (the Bayán) was sufficient proof to recognize Him.

Thou contendest, 'How can we recognize Him when we have heard naught but words which fall short of irrefutable proofs?' Yet since thou hast acknowledged and recognized Muhammad, the Apostle of God, through the Qur'án, how canst thou *withhold recognition* from Him Who sent thee the Book, despite thy calling thyself 'His servant'? Verily He doth exercise undisputed authority over His revelations unto all mankind. [Báb, (1976), "Address to a Muslim Divine," 33]

The Bayán shall constitute God's unerring balance till the Day of Resurrection which is the Day of Him Whom God will make manifest. Whoso acteth in conformity with that which is revealed therein will abide in Paradise, under the shadow of His affirmation and reckoned among the most sublime Letters in the presence of God; while whoso deviateth, were it even so much as the tip of a grain of barley, will be consigned to the fire and will be assembled beneath the shadow of negation. This truth hath likewise been laid bare in the Qur'án where in numerous instances God hath set down that whoever should *pass judgment contrary to the bounds fixed by Him*, would be deemed an infidel...As it hath been revealed: 'Almost might the heavens be rent and the earth be cleft asunder and the mountains fall down in fragments.' And yet how much *harder than these mountains* their hearts must be to have remained unmoved! Indeed no paradise is more glorious in the sight of God than attainment unto His good-pleasure. II, 6. (Italics added) [Báb (1976), "Excerpts from the Persian Bayán," 102-3]

Contrast the Sherif's lack of innate ability to recognize the Báb as the Promised One with the quiet conversion of Mullá Sádiq-i-Khurasaní.* Mullá Sádiq had asked if it might be possible to "seek independently the grace of the All-Merciful and, through prayer, to discover His identity." Mullá Husayn replied, "The door of His grace is never closed before the face of him who seeks to find Him." Thereafter, while communing with God, Mullá Sádiq recognized in a vision the youthful face of the Báb. [Nabíl-i-Zarandí (1892), 100]

Throughout the Báb's discourse, He maintains the sovereignty of God to ordain as He pleases, independent of the piety of men, doubtless embodied in the Sherif of Mecca, or even in the Báb's own followers who later refused to recognize Bahá'u'lláh, whose hearts were, in fact, "harder than these mountains."

Say, were He Whom God shall make manifest to pronounce a pious and truthful follower of the Bayán as false, it is incumbent upon you to submit to His decree, as this hath been affirmed by God in the Bayán; verily God is able to convert light into fire whenever He pleaseth; surely He is potent over all things. XVII, 4. [Báb (1976), "Excerpts from the Kitáb-i-'Asmá' (Book of Names)," 142]

* Mullá Sádiq was formerly named Muqaddas, and surnamed Ismu'lláhu'l-Asdaq by Bahá'u'lláh. [Nabíl-i-Zarandí (1892), 100]

In numerous instances, the Báb pleads to “return to Us,” in order to experience transformation of “fire” into “light” so as to receive what “beseemeth the majesty of [God’s] transcendent dominion.”

I beseech Thee, O my Lord, by Thy most effulgent splendour, before whose brightness every soul humbly boweth down and prostrateth itself in adoration for Thy sake--a splendour before whose radiance fire is turned into light, the dead are brought to life and every difficulty is changed into ease. I entreat Thee by this great, this wondrous splendour and by the glory of Thine exalted sovereignty, O Thou Who art the Lord of indomitable power, to transform us through Thy bounty into that which Thou Thyself dost possess and enable us to become fountains of Thy light, and graciously vouchsafe unto us that which beseemeth the majesty of Thy transcendent dominion. [Báb, (1976), “Prayers and Meditations,” 180]

The Báb sees man’s happiness and highest perfections attainable by “faith in God in every Dispensation” and “acceptance of what hath been revealed by Him,” warning that fulfilment of these potential perfections is only achieved through *true knowledge and wealth*, not worldly learning or wealth.

No created thing shall ever attain its *paradise* unless it appeareth in its *highest prescribed degree of perfection*. For instance, this crystal representeth the paradise of the stone whereof its substance is composed. Likewise there are various stages in the paradise for the crystal itself... So long as it was stone it was worthless, but if it attaineth the excellence of ruby--a potentiality which is latent in it-- how much a carat will it be worth? Consider likewise every created thing.

Man's *highest station*, however, is attained through faith in God in every Dispensation and by acceptance of what hath been revealed by Him, and not through learning; inasmuch as in every nation there are learned men who are versed in divers sciences. Nor is it attainable through wealth; for it is similarly evident that among the various classes in every nation there are those possessed of riches. Likewise are other transitory things.

True knowledge, therefore, is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation. Nor is there any wealth save in poverty in all save God and sanctity from aught else but Him--a state that can be realized only when demonstrated towards Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation. V, 4. (Italics added) [Báb, (1976), “Excerpts from the Persian Bayán,” 88-89]

The Báb unequivocally states that conversion necessarily requires an understanding that supports behavioral confirmation of the new standard or paradigm. If at first that understanding is lacking, there is a set time within which *return* and *conversion* from “negation” to “affirmation” are possible.

If thou art of them that truly believe, thou hast no other alternative than to bear allegiance unto it. This is the Way of God for all the inhabitants of earth and heaven and all that lieth betwixt them....

In truth We tested thee and found that thou wert not of them that are endowed with understanding, wherefore We passed upon thee the sentence of negation, as a token of justice from Our presence; and verily We are equitable.

However, shouldst thou *return unto Us*, We would convert thy negation into affirmation. Verily We are the One Who is of immense bounteousness. But should the Primal Point cease to be with you, then the judgement given in the Words of God shall be final and unalterable and every one will assuredly uphold it. (Italics added) [Báb, (1976), “Address to Sulaymán, One of the Muslim Divines in the Land of Masqat,” 35; 36]

We now deal with the challenge of (3) *sacrifice* through the exercise of the will – an exercise necessary for spiritual transformation. The essential message of Bábí history is that the Báb laid out His entire being as a sacrifice to prepare for the coming of Bahá’u’lláh – the Most Great Name.

Glorified art Thou, O my God! I invoke Thee by Thy Most Great Name through which the hidden secrets of God, the Most Exalted, were divulged and the kindreds of all nations converged toward the focal centre of faith and certitude, through which Thy luminous Words streamed forth for the quickening of mankind and the essence of all knowledge was revealed from that Embodiment of bounty. May my life, my inmost being, my soul and my body be offered up as a sacrifice for the dust ennobled by His footsteps. [Báb, (1976), “Prayers and Meditations,” 1999]

It is interesting that the Báb uses the analogy of the seed, which sacrifices its form in order to become a tree that bears fruits. Although the Báb saw himself gathering the fruits of the seed of Muhammad’s Revelation, He saw Himself as the seed as well, and “Him Whom God shall make manifest” (Bahá’u’lláh) as the tree bringing the perfections in the “Day of Resurrection” when all men will attain God’s Presence [through Bahá’u’lláh]. With this perspective, the Báb viewed his incarceration in Máh-Ku as “adverse effects” – as if a seed, he was being buried in the mountains.

For today, the Bayán is in the stage of seed; at the beginning of the manifestation of Him Whom God shall make manifest its ultimate perfection will become apparent. He is made manifest in order to gather the fruits of the trees He hath planted; even as the Revelation of the Qá’im [He Who ariseth] (the Báb referring to Himself), a descendant of Muhammad -- may the blessings of God rest upon Him -- is exactly like unto the Revelation of the Apostle of God Himself [Muhammad]. He appeareth not, save for the purpose of gathering the fruits of Islám from the Qur’anic verses which He [Muhammad] hath sown in the hearts of men. The fruits of Islám cannot be gathered except through allegiance unto Him [the Qá’im] and by believing in Him. At the present time, however, only adverse effects have resulted; for although He hath appeared in the midmost heart of Islám, and all people profess it by reason of their relationship to Him [the Qá’im], yet unjustly have they consigned Him to the Mountain of Máh-Ku, and this notwithstanding that in the Qur’án the advent of the Day of Resurrection hath been promised unto all by God. For on that Day all men will be brought before God and will attain His Presence; which meaneth appearance before Him Who is the Tree of divine Reality and attainment unto His presence; inasmuch as it is not possible to appear before the Most Holy Essence of God, nor is it conceivable to seek reunion with Him. That which is feasible in the matter of appearance before Him and of meeting Him is attainment unto the Primal Tree. II, 7. [Báb, (1976), “Excerpts from the Persian Bayán,” 108]

Likewise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the fruit of Bahá’u’lláh, and from that fact, also the seed of the growth of the Faith throughout the world. Addressing the “members of the House of Spirituality” of Chicago, 1908,

he indicated that those arising on the American continent would become the “trees” bearing “excellent fruits.” Characteristically, fruits sacrifice themselves for their seed, with the marvelous qualities ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described in his Tablets (Letters) to the early American Believers,

I ask God to make ye lamps ignited by the great Light, so that ye may stand with all power, meekness, humbleness, sacrifice and self-resignation and thus become examples for the people and pure types for the world, be salt of the earth, stars of guidance, great trees with broad foliage and excellent fruits of fragrant scent. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1908), 8 – available in Schooley (1998)]

In another Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urged the Friends to follow his example as a living sacrifice, whereas the Báb and His followers gave their very lives in supreme sacrifice.

...calamities are bestowal itself, hardship is the reality of mercy, discomposure is but composure of mind, and sacrifice of life is a manifest gift. Whatever may happen is a bounty from God, the Most High. Be ye engaged in your own affairs; be employed in guiding the people; train the souls in the qualities and nature of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and convey the glad-tidings of the Kingdom of ABHÁ to the people. Do not seek rest during night and day and sit not tranquil for a minute. Bring these glad-tidings to the hearing of mankind with the utmost exertion, and accept every calamity and affliction in your love for God and reliance on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Endure the censure of enemies and bear the reproaches of the people of oppression with patience. *Follow the example of `Abdul-Bahá* and at every moment wish to offer yourselves in the path of the Beauty of ABHA. Shine ye like unto the sun and roar and move like unto the sea; impart life to mountain and desert like unto clouds, and similar to the vernal breeze, bestow freshness, grace and elegance on the trees of human temples. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1908), 38 – available in Schooley (1998)]

All alone, in a way which is beyond imagination, He [the Báb] upheld the Cause among the Persians, who are renowned for their religious fanaticism. This illustrious Soul arose with such power that He shook the supports of the religion, of the morals, the conditions, the habits and the customs of Persia, and instituted new rules, new laws and a new religion. Though the great personages of the State, nearly all the clergy, and the public men arose to destroy and annihilate Him, He alone withstood them and moved the whole of Persia.

Many `ulamá and public men, as well as other people, joyfully sacrificed their lives in His Cause, and hastened to the plain of martyrdom. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1990), *Some Answered Questions*, 25]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá reminds us that sacrifice and endurance of suffering are possible because the spirit is immortal and the basis of all true progress.

If the spirit were not immortal, how could the Manifestations of God endure such terrible trials?

Why did Christ Jesus suffer the fearful death on the cross?

Why did Muhammad bear persecutions? Why did the Báb make the supreme sacrifice and why did Bahá'u'lláh pass the years of his life in prison?

Why should all this suffering have been, if not to prove the everlasting life of the spirit?

Christ suffered, He accepted all His trials because of the immortality of His spirit. If a man reflects he will understand the spiritual significance of the law of progress; how all moves from the inferior to the superior degree. [ʿAbdu'l-Bahá (1969), 93-94]

Finally, after recounting the horrors suffered by the martyrs of the Báb's cause in Zanján, Nayríz, and Shíráz, Shoghi Effendi writes that many, from "Bahá'u'lláh Himself down to the most disinterested observers in distant lands," have paid tribute to the heroes, saints and martyrs of that Primitive Age, whose sacrifice "impregnated" the entire earth with the signs of God's sovereignty, soon to be manifested.

Thus drew to a close a chapter which records for all time the bloodiest, the most tragic, the most heroic period of the first Bahá'í century. The torrents of blood that poured out during those crowded and calamitous years may be regarded as constituting the fertile seeds of that World Order which a swiftly succeeding and still greater Revelation was to proclaim and establish. The tributes paid the noble army of the heroes, saints and martyrs of that Primitive Age, by friend and foe alike, from Bahá'u'lláh Himself down to the most disinterested observers in distant lands, and from the moment of its birth until the present day, bear imperishable witness to the glory of the deeds that immortalize that Age.

"The whole world," is Bahá'u'lláh's matchless testimony in the Kitáb-i-Iqán, "marveled at the manner of their sacrifice.... The mind is bewildered at their deeds, and the soul marveleth at their fortitude and bodily endurance.... Hath any age witnessed such momentous happenings?" And again: "Hath the world, since the days of Adam, witnessed such tumult, such violent commotion?... Methinks, patience was revealed only by virtue of their fortitude, and faithfulness itself was begotten only by their deeds." "Through the blood which they shed," He, in a prayer, referring more specifically to the martyrs of the Faith, has significantly affirmed, "the earth hath been impregnated with the wondrous revelations of Thy might and the gem-like signs of Thy glorious sovereignty. Ere long shall she tell out her tidings, when the set time is come."
[Shoghi Effendi (1944), 79-80]

Conclusion and Questions to Explore

The essential dynamic of history released by the Dawn-breakers of Persia, so well described by Shoghi Effendi in his Foreword to *God Passes By* [(1944)], is now impelling mankind to seek a new paradigm, discernibly embryonic and operable in the Bahá'í system, of unimaginable power and brilliance.

The weight of the potentialities with which this Faith, possessing no peer or equal in the world's spiritual history, and marking the culmination of a universal prophetic cycle, has been endowed, staggers our imagination. The brightness of the millennial glory which it must shed in the fullness of time dazzles our eyes.
[Shoghi Effendi (1944), i .]

The Universal House of Justice calls this paradigm, to which Baha'is themselves must commit,

a fundamental change of consciousness, a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family. Commitment to this revolutionizing principle will increasingly empower individual believers and Bahá'í institutions alike in awakening others to the Day of God and to the latent spiritual and moral capacities that can change this world into another world. [UHJ (2001c), paragraph 5]

Questions. We leave this exploration with some pertinent questions for further inquiry, given that mankind appears to be struggling with the agonizing pangs of birthing an unknown future.

- 1-- What is the nature of risk and sacrifice in passing from a known, comfortable paradigm to a new one leading into the unknown?
- 2-- What kind of paradigm shift occurred in Persia of the 1840s that allowed Shi'ah Muslims to grasp new religious truth, that is, convert from Islám to the Bábí religion?
- 3-- How does a deeper understanding of the Bábí experience help the Bahá'í community in this period of the half-light, caught between powerful forces of destruction due to "satanic thinking," and the recreating forces of submission (islám) to the will of the Manifestation of God for this age?
- 4-- If modern humans, living under a nation-state system in an information-based society, still cling to any one of a host of belief systems or ethnic identities – what kind of knowledge would enable humans to make the transition from a conditioned, particular worldview to the universality of the Bahá'í Revelation?

As a start to answering these questions, we might refer to the Bahá'í historian, Moojan Momen, one of the distinguished faculty of this “Dawnbreakers” course, who posted to course participants on May 2, 2001, some comments on the nature of history.

The writing of history is (along with art, science and literature) part of the construction of a social reality. The writing of history is a powerful social force. Whenever people have wanted to march forward in a new direction, the first thing that they have done is to retell their past. The story one recounts of the past tells you how you got to be where you are now and gives you the direction that you are moving into the future.

Shoghi Effendi was very conscious of this. When he wanted the American Baha'is to leave their comfortable homes and pioneer to poor and difficult parts of Latin America in the Second Six Year Plan, he first spent an enormous amount of his precious time researching and translating Nabil's Narrative. This was no mere coincidence - Shoghi Effendi calls the American Baha'is "the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age" - in other words he re-directs them to think of the Bábí heroes of the past as their spiritual ancestors- he recreates their past for them. And by recreating this past, he gives them the courage and strength to go forward into the future that he has mapped out for them:

The community of the organized promoters of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the American continent - the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age, who by their death proclaimed the birth of that Faith - must, in turn, usher in, not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter. (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 7)

[End of quote from Moojan Momen's comment of May 2, 2001]

As to a modern approach to this process of ushering in the new World Order – the coming age of the Unity of Mankind, initiated by the sacrificial life of the Báb – we might consider the seminal paper by J. Douglas Martin, written in 1992 in view of the centenary celebration of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. Martin concludes that Bahá'u'lláh's message must be presented in such a way as to transcend categories of religious conversion and ecclesiastical organization. By now, he says, Baha'is have established

the credentials of the Faith as an independent religious system. But the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh goes far beyond anything that humanity understands by the word "religion." If the ecclesiastical systems of our world are religion, then the Cause is not; if it is religion, then they really are not. It does a disservice to the mission of Bahá'u'lláh, to the World Order which He has come to establish, to focus our public message in religious categories.

As the Prophet of global civilization, Bahá'u'lláh addresses all of humankind. The principles in His writings, the vision of civilization He propounds, His prescriptions for the moral reformation of society and human nature are a universal legacy, without conditions, without prior commitment. The new Covenant between God and man which He proclaims is not an organization nor an ideology, but a universal reality operating within every soul and between all souls. It is readily accessible to independent investigation and discovery, "the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity." It is reality. Ultimately it will engage the minds and spirits of all people, because the nature of reality is to do so. [Martin (1992), concluding paragraphs]

Modern civilization – if it is to be reborn and continually transformed so as to advance and survive – will bring to bear the energy of personal sacrifice, animated and directed with wisdom by love for Bahá'u'lláh's Cause for which the Báb laid down his life. This will be done as a witness to the reality of the Oneness of mankind and of the world of creation – as we accept the call to be servants of the emerging Dawn of an Age of Glory. Nowhere is the challenge of this call so potent as among the peoples of the Pacific Rim.

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