

Bahá'u'lláh as “World Reformer”*

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Abstract

Vindicating the mission of the Persian reformer known as the Báb (d. 1850) Bahá'u'lláh's *Book of Certitude* (1862) focused on spiritual authority from an Islamic perspective. In this work, a subtext may be discerned, in which Bahá'u'lláh intimates his own mission in the same terms of reference. Later, in his epistles to the monarchs of Europe and West Asia (1866–1869), Bahá'u'lláh exercised that authority and spoke of world reform. This article places Bahá'u'lláh in the context of Islamic reform, with particular reference to the advocacy of constitutional democracy by prominent Iranian secularists. In an ideological ether pervaded by “Westoxication,” Bahá'u'lláh sought to reverse the direction of Western influence. Bahá'u'lláh prosecuted his own reforms in three stages: Bábí reform; Persian reform; and world reform. In the centrifugal sequence, Bahá'u'lláh is shown to have bypassed Islamic reform altogether in his professed role as “World Reformer.”

O Queen in London! . . . Consider these days in which He Who is the Ancient Beauty hath come in the Most Great Name, that He may quicken the world and unite its peoples. . . . Were anyone to tell them: “The World Reformer is come,” they would answer and say: “Indeed it is proven that He is a fomenter of discord!” . . . Say: “O people! The Sun of Utterance beameth forth in this day, above the horizon of bounty, and the radiance of the Revelation of Him Who spoke on Sinai flasheth and glisteneth before all religions.”

— Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet to Queen Victoria, 1868

Internal evidence establishes that *The Book of Certitude* was revealed in 1862. “In Istanbul in 1863,” according to J. R. I. Cole, Bahá'u'lláh “first gave evidence of thinking about the global social reforms that he advocated in later years” (“Bahá'-Alláh” 425). *The Book of Certitude* obliquely established the doctrinal foundation for Bahá'u'lláh's authority as the messianic “World Reformer.”¹ The programmatic articulation of his world reforms followed, a few of which reforms will be discussed in the course of this article.

Drawing on the elegant theoretical groundwork of Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* as a framework of analysis in another work,² I related Bahá'u'lláh's techniques of symbolic exegesis to the dozen or so kinds of procedural devices employed in the classical *tafsír*³ tradition. One remarkable feature of *The Book of Certitude* is its creative use of fairly standard classical exegetical procedures to effect a stunning assault on the most intractable of Islamic dogmas—the finality of revelation vested in the Prophet Muhammad. The implications of Bahá'u'lláh's exegetical argument alone suffice to establish the intention of a clear break from Islam.

Transforming its essentially deconstructive argument against revelatory finality into a positive vindication of the Báb, *The Book of Certitude* is charged with eschatological intimations of Bahá'u'lláh's own messianic status, kept under wraps as a “messianic secret,”⁴ so to speak, until his declaration in Baghdad in the Spring of 1863. Indeed, the constructive outcome of the argument against revelatory finality is that revelation is progressive, cyclical, and unending. This teaching was put to the test not long after *The Book of Certitude* was revealed. After his declaration, *The Book of Certitude* took on its new role as an apology for Bahá'u'lláh, yet the text never names Bahá'u'lláh directly. Nonetheless, apart from the eschatological figures of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* simply had no other authority linkages.

The Book of Certitude was charged with ideological charisma. For converts, the text revolutionized the traditional Islamic eschatological worldview. All of the fantastic and surreal images in the Qur'án were demystified and personalized. Virtually all of the Last Day savior imagery was considered “fulfilled” in the person of Bahá'u'lláh. The eschatological linkage was important. Without it, Bahá'u'lláh's reforms would have remained inert, if stripped of the dream “logic” of the *eschaton* and its spiritual rewards.

In prophetological terms, Bahá'u'lláh's doctrine of “Progressive Revelation” makes possible a post-Islamic religiosity, replete with its own missionary and, in a sense, “secular” activism. Bound up with this sense of

successive dispensations is the concept of social evolution. The nineteenth-century milieu looked much different than the sands of Arabia in the seventh century. New social threats loomed with the advance of European war technology, encroaching secularism, and the unstoppable hegemony of the colonial powers—in a word, all the problems of modernity for the Middle East.

A case in point surrounds the Islamic doctrine of holy war (*jihād*). In Bahá'u'lláh's estimation, holy war had outlived its utility and justification (this was decisively proven in the failure of Bábí militarism) in a decidedly post-Islamic world. Not surprisingly, in this light at least, the abrogation of the doctrine of holy war constituted Bahá'u'lláh's first legislative act in his new role as the messianic "Manifestation of God" in 1863.

There were certain reforms Bahá'u'lláh had envisioned. These reforms were at first localized, initially concerned with the revitalization of the Bábí community in Persia and its diasporal center in Baghdad. Once his leadership had proven itself indispensable and the force of his charisma had won over the allegiance of the majority of Bábis, Bahá'u'lláh could then announce his mission as the "World Reformer" par excellence (Tablet to Queen Victoria, excerpted by Bahá'u'lláh in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 59–64; partially translated in Browne, *Selections*). This mission was cast in eschatological terms but was legislatively enacted as reform and appears to have been increasingly directed towards the West, as Bahá'u'lláh's epistolary summonses to the potentates of Europe and the Americas attest.

For the most part, Bahá'u'lláh bypassed Islamic reform altogether to pursue the transformation of the social planet. On a number of occasions, Bahá'u'lláh certainly addressed issues of Persian reform, but these admonitions were subsidiary to his greater reformist objectives. On questions of Persian reform, Bahá'u'lláh commissioned his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1875 to compose a separate treatise on the subject. This treatise was published in Bombay in 1882 and enjoyed considerable popular circulation among the Bahá'ís and their personal contacts.⁵

In the cross-cultural past, eschatology has historically been drawn upon as a potent ideology to legitimate revolutions. Bahá'u'lláh's revolution was of a different nature in its relation to the State. Governments were not to be overthrown but transformed. The power to effect such transformations did not rest with Bahá'u'lláh alone, however. Bahá'í principles were seen as moral forces; ideally, Bahá'ís were seen as agents of change—the martial "hosts" of the proverbial "Lord of hosts." Cole observes that the Bahá'ís of Iran "combined democratic rhetoric with millenarian imagery in the generation before the Constitutional Revolution."⁶

The reforms Bahá'u'lláh pursued were not articulated in isolation. Many were part of the ideological ether and were emblematic of the times, so to speak. Without diminishing Bahá'u'lláh's originality, this study will endeavor to contextualize those reforms within the context of Persian reform, as Cole has done in the context of Ottoman reform ("Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought" 1–26). The Young Ottomans' movement is surely relevant,⁷ and Cole's study offers a balance to the otherwise Persian-focused scope of this study.

The views of the Persian reformers, profiled below, should suffice to give the reader a fair impression of the motivations that impelled Islamic reformers in general to pursue their objectives, and of the nature and scope of the reforms themselves. Congruences as well as differences among these reformers in comparison with Bahá'u'lláh's reforms will be brought into relief. The reader should note one important distinction throughout, as far as Persian reformers are concerned: even the secular reformers, for the most part, talked of Islamic reform. The Islamic framework is likewise maintained by the otherwise secularist Young Ottomans (Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought" 10). Bahá'u'lláh advocated religious reform that went beyond Islam.

The Symbolic Universe of "Progressive Revelation"

Bahá'u'lláh has moved from Muhammad's perceived seal of revelation in Muslim dogma to a Bahá'í doctrine of "Progressive Revelation." This then allows Bahá'u'lláh to continue to legitimate his authority and to pursue the role of a prophet-legislator.

Royalist imagery pervades—one might even say, dominates—Bahá'u'lláh's writings wherever references to authority occur. The eschatological imagery clustered around the figure of the Báb was generalized to include Bahá'u'lláh. In the course of his post-declaration proclamation to kings and ecclesiastics, Bahá'u'lláh in effect assumed some of the messianic dignities originally associated with his precursor, the Báb, as documented in *The Book of Certitude* itself. This was made all the more possible since *The Book of Certitude* articulated an inclusivist prophethood in which virtually every prophetic dignity was shared by one and all of the Manifestations of God.

Of Bahá'u'lláh's particular tributes to the Báb in *The Book of Certitude* are exceptional attributive titles such as "Essences of Essences" and "Sea of Seas," "divine Luminary," "that eternal Sun," "that Ocean of divine wisdom," and so forth (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 234). Some of the imagery transfer to Bahá'u'lláh is foreshadowed in *The Book of Certitude* under the prophetic code name *Mustagháth*:

And now, We beseech the people of the Bayán, all the learned, the sages, the divines, and witnesses amongst them, not to forget the wishes and admonitions revealed in their Book. Let them, at all times, fix their gaze upon the essentials of His Cause, lest when He, Who is the Quintessence of truth, the inmost Reality of all things, the Source of all light, is made manifest, they cling unto certain passages of the Book, and inflict upon Him that which was inflicted in the Dispensation of the Qur’án. For, verily, powerful is He, the King of divine might, to extinguish with one letter of His wondrous words, the breath of life in the whole of the Bayán and the people thereof, and with one letter bestow upon them a new and everlasting life, and cause them to arise and speed out of the sepulchres of their vain and selfish desires. Take heed, and be watchful; and remember that all things have their consummation in belief in Him, in attainment unto His day, and in the realization of His divine presence. “There is no piety in turning your faces toward the east or toward the west, but he is pious who believeth in God and the Last Day” (Qur’án 2:176). (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 92–93)

Bahá’u’lláh later claimed to be the one foretold by the Báb: “. . . I, verily, am the one promised in *al-mustagháth* with the name of *man yuzhiruhu’lláh*.”⁸ The reference here to *al-mustagháth* has to do with Bábí cabalistic speculations as to the timing of the messianic advent. Belief in God on the Last Day, in Bahá’í theophanology, means acceptance of the Prophet, or “Manifestation of God,” who speaks on behalf of God. This mode of divine proxy is familiar within the Abrahamic Faiths. Proceeding now from form to content, we have already noted the fact that *The Book of Certitude* came to be associated with specific reformist teachings, through their reciprocal connection with Bahá’u’lláh. These reformist teachings, a few of which will be presented below, came to be associated in a programmatic way with *The Book of Certitude*, in the transition from faith to works, from personal salvation to mutual salvation in Bahá’u’lláh’s social gospel.

***The Book of Certitude* and Its Reformist Associations**

With regard to the question of authority, *The Book of Certitude* had far-reaching religious implications. It provided the rationale for looking beyond Islam. Without a corresponding political vision of what a realized eschatology might look like in the realm of human affairs, *The Book of Certitude* would be little more than a theological, evidential work—invoking Qur’án anti tradition to vindicate the Báb’s revelatory claims. To see its real place in religious history, therefore, *The Book of Certitude* should be looked at from the perspective of its reformist associations and the direction in which it steered a religious movement.

Expectations were set up in both native and exiled Bábí communities (Persia and Baghdad) of an eschatological figure foretold by the Báb, viz., “He Whom God Shall Manifest” (*man yuzhiruhu’lláh*). This eschatological tension had the effect of relativizing the Báb’s own *Shari’ah* to its own eventual eclipse. Amanat observes:

The idea of perpetual Zuhūr, conceived by the Báb and enshrined in the chiliastic notion of the He Whom God Shall Manifest, essentially militated against the institutionalization of the Babi religion. The Babi theology was erected on the precept of the prophetic continuity and the sense of vigilance for future divine revelations. . . .

The possibility of the Babi shari’a’s being nullified and replaced by a future manifestation, particularly since the time of his advent was signaled in the Bayán in the cryptic code of *mustagháth* (he who shall be called upon for help), was an open invitation for messianic innovation. (*Resurrection and Renewal* 410)

In *The Book of Certitude*, Bahá’u’lláh reinforces expectations of a new law. In the process of validating the immediate past in the advent of the Báb, statements about the future were lent greater authenticity. Bahá’u’lláh sustained Bábí chiliastic hopes through calls for a state of readiness to “meet God” in the person of Him Whom God Shall Manifest, in the near future:

When the channel of the human soul is cleansed of all worldly and impeding attachments, it will unfailingly perceive the breath of the Beloved across immeasurable distances, and will, led by its perfume, attain and enter the City of Certitude. . . .

They that valiantly labour in quest of God’s will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, will be so attached and wedded to that City that a moment’s separation from it would to them be unthinkable. They will hearken unto infallible proofs from the Hyacinth of that assembly, and receive the

surest testimonies from the beauty of its Rose and the melody of its Nightingale. Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and re-adorned.

Wherefore, O my friend, it behooveth Us to exert the highest endeavour to attain unto that City, and, by the grace of God and His loving-kindness, rend asunder the “veils of glory”. . . . That city is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad the Messenger of God the Qur’án; in this day the Bayán; and in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme. (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 197–200)

Reference here to thousand-year intervals would not necessarily have led Bábí readers to expect a distant messianic advent, for there were very definite short-term eschatological expectations. In its Bábí context, *The Book of Certitude* functioned as an apologia for the Báb. It will always remain so, of course. A year after *The Book of Certitude* was written, the context was to change radically following Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration on the eve of his departure from Baghdad to Constantinople in the Spring of 1863.

Once the context had seen a shift in terms of authority—from the Báb to Bahá’u’lláh—the reflexive validation of his own prophetic credentials, which *The Book of Certitude* served to enhance, took on all of the associations of his later teachings. The terms of reference for belief brooked no real separation between revelator and revelation. Once one accepted the eschatological assertions Bahá’u’lláh had advanced—the interpretive logic of which had already been developed at length in *The Book of Certitude*—it remained for such a convert to embrace Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. Those teachings can be analyzed from a reformist perspective.

Three stages of reform will be seen within the expansion of Bahá’u’lláh’s influence, culminating in activism beyond the pale of Islam, to be enacted on the world stage. *The Book of Certitude* was written as a preparatory stage in Bahá’u’lláh’s reformist ministry. This is a retrospective interpretation, and it will be necessary to reconstruct the progression of Bahá’u’lláh’s reformist efforts on the basis of contemporary documents. Bahá’u’lláh will be presented as a reformer, concerned initially with (1) Bábí reform; (2) intermittently with Persian reform; (3) and fully absorbed by the question of world reform. In representing Bahá’u’lláh as a reformer, the immediate question that arises is: What of Islamic reform? From a certain point of view, the assessment of Hamid Algar has considerable insight, in that he draws a distinction between Islamic reform and Islamic terminology:

Babism, as a movement taking its starting point within Islam and then swiftly going beyond its bounds, might also in a certain sense be thought of as a “reform” of Islam, parallel to Malkum’s own project of an “Islamic renaissance.” Malkum’s plan, like Babism, entailed the use of Islamic terminology for purposes fundamentally alien to the Islamic faith. (*Mirzá Malkum Khán* 59)

As to the Bábí movement, Algar does not elaborate on exactly what purposes were “alien to the Islamic faith,” but surely the break from Islam is meant. It must be remembered that the Báb had already broken with Islam. This did not, of itself, preclude the Bábí or a Bábí movement from occupying itself with Islamic reform, as was the case with Azalí Babism. Later conflation of the Bábí and Bahá’í ideologies aside, if we draw a distinction between the Bábí and Bahá’í movements, it is clear that the Bábí movement represented one reformist solution to the pressures and perils facing Persia in the mid-nineteenth century, as Amanat points out:

The Bábí phenomenon sprang up at a time when Persian society was on the verge of a crucial transition. Tormented by its age-old dilemmas, the Persian mind was beginning to be exposed to a materially superior civilization. The emergence of the Babi doctrine thus was perhaps the last chance for a [*sic*] indigenous reform movement before that society became truly affected by the consequences of the Western predominance, first in material and then in ideological spheres. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, the Babi doctrine attempted to address, rather than ignore, the issues that lay at the foundation of the Persian consciousness. The Bábí solution was the product of an esoteric legacy, one that sought redemptive regeneration in a break with the past without being essentially alien to the spirit of that past. (*Resurrection and Renewal* 413)

Amanat goes on to explain that the Bábí worldview was not consciously affected by the Western ethos, nor was it influenced by the Western positivist models of progress and humanism. Unlike later Islamic reformers, who shrank from tampering with time-honored dogma, the Báb “sought to resolve the predicaments of Islamic eschatology by returning to the basic issues of prophethood, resurrection, and the hereafter” (*Resurrection and Renewal* 413). The

exposure of messianic paradigms to new historical circumstances was such that, according to Amanat, “The Bahá’í religion came to represent revisionist tendencies within the movement that sought to achieve further religious innovation by means of moral aptitude and adoption of modern social reforms” (*Resurrection and Renewal* 414).

While this analysis is easy to accept at face value, Amanat adduces no concrete evidence to support his statement to the effect that Bahá’u’lláh, in pursuing reform, was influenced by Western models, either directly or through the agency of Islamic reform movements. Bahá’u’lláh certainly had high regard for constitutional monarchies and republics, particularly the British model, but was critical of Bonapartist France and absolutist Prussia. The middle ground between the determinist or originist analysis of Bahá’u’lláh’s reforms and Bahá’í religious bias, which sees Bahá’u’lláh as the expression of universal spiritual ferment, is perhaps the surest position to take. It is the methodological integration of two sets of contextualizing perceptions.

For Bahá’u’lláh, progress became a global issue beyond Islam and beyond the Bábí movement as well. In this sense, Bahá’u’lláh never directly pursued Islamic reform but rather, bypassed it. The way in which his reforms, though resembling in significant respects Islamic reform, departed from the norm is borne out by a typology of Islamic reform movements developed by Shephard (“Islam and Ideology” 307–36). The difference between Bahá’u’lláh’s reforms and those of other contemporary reformers is nothing short of categorical. The ideological divide, as will be shown below, is over Islamic law. Shepard’s typology is based on the doctrinal content of a wide range of movements, which, according to Shepard, each fall into one or another of the following five categories:

Secularism

This category of reform refers to recourse to ideology other than Islam, in which the *Shari’ah* is effectively supplanted. “Secular” does not necessarily mean non-religious. Usually it means that religion is not the direct or controlling force in legislation. Secular reform best serves as an ideology for Muslim minorities. It tends to create a Westernized élite, widening the gap between that élite and the rest of society, as in prerevolutionary Iran. *Radical secularism* seeks to replace the Church by the State, so to speak, as exemplified by Marxist Albania, whose constitution had no place for religion. Such a State, within which church and mosque are under lock-and-key, may be said to be anti-religious. Moderate secularism seeks to separate Church and State, as exemplified by the “neutral” secularism of Turkey, which in 1928 struck from its constitution the clause that made Islam the State religion. Such movements may include what Shepard calls “Muslim” secularism as in Egypt, whose constitution pays lip service to Islam as “the religion of the State” but which derives considerable authority and legislation from popular sovereignty. This category may also extend to the “religious” secularism of Indonesia.

Islamic Modernism

This ideology insists that Islam provides an adequate ideological basis for public life. Islamic modernism shows a certain adaptive flexibility, however, in the exercise and application of the *Shari’ah*. Such movements attempt to integrate Islamic authenticity with proven models for development as evolved in the West. Pakistan’s constitution aligns principles of democracy and various civil rights with Islamic ideals. Such reform may provide an Islamic veneer for essentially secularist agendas, through restricting the sources of Islamic authority. Reinterpreting authority, modernist apologetics will tend to link aspects of the Islamic tradition with Western practices.

Radical Islamism

The so-called fundamentalists figure here, with their claims to Islamic authenticity. Islam is seen as distinct from all other ideologies. The religion is sufficient unto itself. There is a place for *ijtihad* (reasoning) in reformulating and applying Muslim law, but the *Shari’ah* must somehow be applied nonetheless: it is the controlling legislation.

Traditionalism

Generally speaking, this is a response to the Western challenge by invoking Islamic paradigms for coping with adversity. *Rejectionist traditionalism* resists Westernization, as with the conservative element in Saudi Arabia. It is best exemplified by nineteenth-century revolts against Western colonial powers and by internal resistance to Westernizing Muslim rulers, *Accommodationist traditionalism* views modernity as corrupt and strikes provisional compromises for purposes of adaptation.

Neo-Traditionalism

Such a movement comes to grips more realistically with the Western threat. Neo-traditionalism accepts the need for modern technology. *Accommodationist neo-traditionalism* is represented by Sufi orders in present-day Egypt, as well as in the views of certain prominent Muslims, such as Sayyid Hossein Nasr. The Islamic revolution in Iran might well fit the description of *rejectionist neo-traditionalism*.

Shepard's typology consists of "responses to the Western impact and of proposals for rehabilitating Muslim history" ("Islam and Ideology" 308). By Shepard's standards, the Bahá'í Faith falls outside the proposed typology, purely on the basis of the Faith's rejection of Islamic law, except perhaps in the case of radical and moderate secularism, which also reject Muslim law codes. Still, Marxist Albania affords no parallel whatever to Bahá'í reform (as Bahá'í law or its consultative principles ought to have a salutary effect on State policy), and the Turkish model is perhaps too secular a parallel as well. Nonetheless, the Bahá'í system is arguably close to "secular" ideology—relative to Islam and not of itself secular—in that it represents a "view that would openly follow an ideology other than Islam in most areas of public life" (Shepard, "Islam and Ideology" 309).

The application of this typology to the Bahá'í Faith can only be done analogously. It would seem, then, that the category of Islamic modernism would best apply, save for the fact that the Bahá'í Faith is not Islam. By analogy, the Bahá'í religion would see itself as a system that "does provide an adequate ideological base for public life" (Shepard, "Islam and Ideology" 311) in extra-Islamic terms. A Bahá'í modernist could, as readily as a Muslim counterpart, "insist that . . . [Bahá'í] . . . social principles are capable of development" (Shepard, "Islam and Ideology" 312).

Then why the break with Islam? Perhaps the Bahá'í perspective, from a certain point of view, has simply carried modernist logic to its "logical" conclusion, relegating to obsolescence the legalist legacy of the past through undermining virtually all of its present authority.⁹ The Bahá'í worldview sees the old wineskins of Islamic legal systems as too inflexible to accommodate reforms equal to the demands of modernity. In the preamble of "The Most Holy Book" (*al-Kitáb al-Aqdas*, referred to in Bahá'í circles by its Persian title, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*), Bahá'u'lláh in fact lends the metaphor of wine to the spirit of his laws, the new law code presumably being the new wineskin: "Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 332).

A simple literature review reveals opposing historical perspectives on the nature of Islamic reform movements and indeed on the relationship of the Bahá'í movement to contemporary reform, particularly Persian reform. We turn now to one of the ongoing academic discussions as to the nature of religion and reform in nineteenth-century Persia. That a comparative approach to reform serves to contextualize the work of Bahá'u'lláh is illuminating but not exhaustive.

Mysticism and Dissent

In *The Roots of the Iranian Revolution* (1983), Hamid Algar presents the Islamic Revolution as a development of the clerical tradition. Algar characterizes both the 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution and the 1979 Iranian Revolution alike in terms of a struggle of the religious classes against the oppressive State. In contrast to this analysis, Mangol Bayat seeks to prove that, in the nineteenth century, the religious classes were far more concerned with their internal affairs than with affairs of State. Bayat depicts the traditional pattern of Shi'í dissent as a struggle against the dominance of the *mujtahids* or sacerdotal authority in general.

According to Bayat's thesis, the *mujtahids'* concentration of power was amassed not to arrogate national leadership but rather to contain dissidents. The essential feature that distinguished orthodox from dissident was a proclivity for pessimism versus optimism. The orthodox saw the world as pejorative, worsening until the salvational advent of the Hidden Imám. Heterodox dissidents usually viewed humanity as evolving towards perfection. It was this optimism that linked traditional dissent with secular modernists.

The failure of the Bábí and *Shaykhí* movements was instructive for social malcontents, who turned elsewhere for inspiration in a model to follow. This they found in the anti-theological, anti-metaphysical thought of eighteenth-century Europe, in the post-Enlightenment critique of religion. The new thinkers in Iran "sought, no matter how awkwardly or how unconvincingly, to accommodate Western ideas with Islam." The efforts of the reformers, however, were secular, and "should by no means be taken for Islamic reformism," since "they all advocated a reform program that would ensure an absolute separation of religious and temporal affairs," Bayat maintains (*Mysticism and Dissent* 134).

Yapp accepts Bayat's argument that explores variations on a common theme in dissent, in which "the challenge to the concept of a closed religious law exclusively interpreted by the *mujtahids* and the assertion of the possibility of change through the agency of the divinely inspired" is the dissident ideal in most cases. The difficulty for Yapp lies in accepting Bayat's contention that "the lay thinkers who emerged at the end of the nineteenth century retained the core of these dissenting ideas and simply transformed the agency of change into reason." Contrary to this analysis, Bayat characterizes modernist reformers as purely "fresh imports from Europe" (Yapp, "Review of *Mysticism and Dissent*" 140–41).

From another perspective, Amanat sees Shiism in the Qájár period as the conflict between: (1) scholastic Shiism—replete with a juristic system dominated by a clerical order—and (2) speculative Shiism, manifested in

“recurring heterodoxies.” Prior to the nineteenth century, the latter led a rather “subterranean” existence in Iran but generated “a new momentum” in the nineteenth century in challenging the prevailing *Shari‘ah* and, to a certain extent, the political order of the day. In contrast to reform movements in Sunni Islam, heterodox movements in Qájár Iran inspired a conscious break with Islamic tenets (Amanat, “Review of Mysticism and Dissent” 467).

Amanat acknowledges Bayat’s original contribution in developing an “elaborate theoretical framework” that seeks to explain an underlying continuity in diverse heterodox movements within the context of dissent. But in trying to forge links between religious and secular movements, Bayat’s “preoccupation with apparent similarities” results in her “overlooking the profound differences” among such groups. Bayat has tried to smooth over such differences through frequent recourse to a “diagnosis of *taqiyya*, which she considers the ultimate solution to all intellectual diversities.”¹⁰

Amanat criticizes Bayat for her lack of insight into the nature of millenarian movements, which to her are all simply chronic manifestations of *bátiní* (esoteric) thought. What took place in the nineteenth-century speculative Shiism, however, was significantly different: “What proved to be critical for later developments,” Amanat writes, “was the introduction of an explicit notion of time and dynamism of change into the static world of *bátin*. This sense of urgency transformed the supratemporal image of the hidden Imam and lends itself to a messianic movement of sizable proportions” (“Review of *Mysticism and Dissent*” 470–71).

As to her treatment of the Bábí upheavals, Bayat is taken to task for not having investigated sufficiently the real causes behind the Bábí revolts, especially as regards the “joint action undertaken by the ulama and the state,” not to mention the fact that the Bábís were “defenders” and not aggressors in the conflict. Bayat “magnifies the militancy” of the Bábís, blowing that dimension of Bábí history out of proportion. In terms of the subsequent unfoldment of the Bábí movement, the author imputes the Bahá’í “doctrinal acceptance of the de facto secularization of politics”¹¹ to Western models, rather than treating Bahá’í concepts “as a logical continuation of Bábí development” (Amanat, “Review of *Mysticism and Dissent*” 472–73).

Another approach is taken by Lambton, who criticizes Bayat for failing to recognize important differences between modern Iranian intellectuals (who view Islam as a vehicle for change) and earlier dissident movements (moved by nostalgia in a desire to return to “true Islam”). Moreover, the terms of reference themselves underwent change. It was to be expected that “in a theocracy such as Islam unorthodoxy and political dissent . . . tend to be expressed in religious terms.” It was only natural that, to gain the support of certain prominent religious leaders, avowed secularists would take pragmatic recourse to an ostensibly Islamic rhetoric. But the “triumph” of Persian constitutionalism was, after all, one of governmental reform, not religious reform, despite the involvement of certain key *‘ulama’*. The consequence of the post–1906 de facto secularization of government—*viz.*, the emergence of a distinct class of “turbaned” specialists in Islamic jurisprudence—is, after all, nothing really new, Lambton points out (Lambton, “Review of *Mysticism and Dissent*” 115–17).

Bayat discusses in some detail five prominent “secular” Persian reformers: (1) Sayyid Jamálu’d-Dín-i-Asadabadí, known as Afghání (1838–97); (2) Malkum Khán (1833–1908); (3) Ákhundzáda (1812–78); (4) Tálibzáda (1834–1911); (5) Mírzá Aqá Khán Kirmání (1853–96). Certain of these reformers have Bábí, Azalí Bábí, and Bahá’í associations.

Sayyid Jamálu’d-Dín-i-Afghání (1838–97)

Afghání’s early education in Persia brought him into contact with *Shaykhí* and Bábí thought. He moved freely in Bábí circles. Dorraj states that it was not only Afghání’s unorthodox ideas but also his “association with the Bábís” that led to his exile from Persia as a youth (*From Zarathustra* 95). Afghání, along with Tálibzáda and Malkum Khán, sought to reconcile with Islam the idea of constitutionalism and social reform (Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 98–99). In his *Answer to Renan*, Afghání distances the brilliant achievements of medieval Islamic science and philosophy from the “heavy yoke” of the jurists and orthodox watchdogs of his day. In the current social crisis, in which Islam is presented as oppressive and backward, Afghání advocated reform in which science is highly prized. He censures the philosophers of his own time for their indifference to the “real sciences” of Western technology. He characterizes the contemporary Muslim philosopher as one who “splits hairs over imaginary essences” (cited in Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 147).

The West, by contrast, was now the master of the world, for the Westerners “have conquered the world, not because of their belief in Jesus or Mary, but because of their capacity to build railroads, to create the telegraph system” (Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 98). Science is what rules the world, and Islamic governments should thus import science if they are to care their social ills. Afghání’s modernism was inspired by Western enlightenment. Bayat’s characterization of Afghání as a secular reformer dismisses his efforts at reconciling Islamic faith and reason as “feeble” and “merely an unconvincing repetition of the view of the Shaikhs and other traditional theosophers.” Bayat determines that “despite his self-appointed mission as the reformer, he does not suggest any

possible redefinition or reformulation of the relationship of Islam to the new sciences, besides the old, worn-out theosophers' argument that the Koran is all-encompassing, and what is needed is only a matter of proper understanding." Thus, according to Bayat, the theosophers' concerns—which the Shaykhís had socialized and the Bábís politicized—were “successfully secularized by Afghani” (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 148).

Afghání freely associated with Bábís, as well as with Jews, Sikhs, and Armenians (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 195). Among his collaborators were Azalí Bábís Mirzá Áqá Khán Kirmání, Shaykh Ahmad Rúhí, and Afdalu’l Mulk Kirmání (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 201). Despite his pan-Islamic ideal, Kirmání did not champion Islam as a religion. Bayat underscores Afghání’s importance by stating: “Afghani is perhaps the most controversial political figure of the Middle East in the nineteenth century” (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 134). His most illustrious student was the great Egyptian reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905).

What, if any, contact or influence was there between Afghání and the Bahá’í community? According to Keddie, Afghání was in touch with the Bábí exiles in Baghdad in the 1850s (*Sayyid Jamál al-Dín* 20–22). But as to influence, nothing can be proven. His antipathy for the Bahá’ís may have had to do with the perceived threat they posed to Islamic unity. Notwithstanding this, it appears Afghání wished to maintain his contacts with Bahá’í leaders since he sent them copies of his newspaper from Paris in the 1880s. Bahá’u’lláh, in his “Tablet of the World” (*Lawh-i-Dunyá*), makes reference to this:

Gracious God! A thing hath recently happened which caused great astonishment. It is reported that a certain person [Afghání] went to the seat of the imperial throne in Persia and succeeded in winning the good graces of some of the nobility by his ingratiating behavior. How pitiful indeed, how deplorable! One wondereth why those who have been the symbols of highest glory should now stoop to boundless shame.

The aforesaid person hath written such things concerning this people [the Bahá’ís] in the Egyptian Press and in the Beirut Encyclopedia that the well-informed and the learned were astonished. He proceeded then to Paris where he published a newspaper entitled ‘*Urvatu’l-Vuthqá* [The Sure Handle] and sent copies thereof to all parts of the world. He also sent a copy to the Prison of ‘Akká, and by so doing he meant to show affection and to make amends for his past actions. In short, this Wronged One bath observed silence in regard to him. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 94–95)¹²

Momen speculates that Afghání may have “found the ideas emanating from this source [the Bahá’ís] useful to him in formulating his own views,” but admits that this is impossible to prove (Momen, “The Bahá’í Influence” 49).

Mirzá Malkum Khán (1833–1908)

The evidence is greater for significant interaction between Bahá’ís and this reformer. An Armenian Christian by birth who converted to Islam, Malkum was the most Westernized of the five secularists. According to Bayat, Malkum Khán was the most modern of all the secular reformers, and it was he who introduced the Western concept of law to Persians. He is considered the father of constitutionalism in Iran (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 162–67). Malkum Khán advocated a superficial Islamicization of constitutionalism to predispose the ‘ulamá’ in its favor (Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 96). To prosecute his reforms, his tactic was to “manipulate religion, and religious sentiment, for a secular end” (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 149). His search for allies led him into Azalí Bábí circles, who were followers of Mirzá Yahyá—known as Subh-i-Azal—Bahá’u’lláh’s rival half-brother. An Azalí source confirms Afghání’s contacts with Bábís in Baghdad. In his interviews with the Western press, he never failed to support the Bábí cause, comparing the new faith to Christianity. This naturally led to his condemnation as a Bábí by his opponents (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 149).

Malkum privately (though somewhat openly) saw reason as imprisoned by religion. He covertly sought to diffuse his humanist ideal through a secret society he founded in 1858, the “House of Oblivion” (*farámúsh khána*)—a lodge possibly modelled on French Freemasonry. This society aroused imperial suspicions of possible Bábí connections, such a charge considered groundless by Gobineau (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 187). The short-lived organization drew the wrath of the clergy and prompted the Shah in 1861 to order it to cease and desist. Malkum then founded a new religious movement, presented as the “religion of humanity” (*dín-i insániyyat*) developed in the revolutionary phase of his career, evidently influenced by Auguste Comte’s *Religion de l’humanité*. Malkum claimed there was no difference between the Bible and the Qur’án, and that the doctrines of the Báb were “identical with those of Jesus Christ” (Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* 188, n. 22).

Malkum’s humanism led him to call for open revolt. To disseminate his views, he started a newspaper called *Qánún* [“Law”], published in 1890. Due to its revolutionary incitements, the paper was quickly banned, though it continued to circulate underground. Ironically, in 1898 Muzaffar al-Dín Shah reinstated Malkum’s titles

late in life and named him ambassador to Rome. “Of all the writer-statesmen Persia produced in the nineteenth century, Malkum Khán was the most articulate and the most prolific” (Farmayan, “Forces of Modernization” 137). His entire reformism may be summed up so: The survival of Persia depends on the adoption of Western civilization (Farmayan, “The Forces of Modernization” 138). Malkum Khán is thought of as the most progressive of nineteenth-century Persian secular reformers and is thus considered the father of constitutionalism in Iran. This intellectual distinction might not, in the final analysis, rightly belong to Malkum Khán. Cole makes this telling observation:

After decades of advocating mere administrative reforms, the embittered ex-diplomat Mirza Malkum Khan, recently dismissed for corruption, finally came out for elected, parliamentary government in his London-based journal, *Qānūn*, in December 1892. Historians of modern Iranian intellectual history have seen this call as something of a breakthrough. Yet Baha’u’llah had, of course, been making this argument openly since 1868, and in the context of the Tobacco Revolt he strongly reaffirmed it in the *Tablet to the World* a year and a half before that historic issue of *Qānūn*. (Cole, “Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought” 19)

On the issue of constitutionalism, Cole points out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had originally supported the Persian constitutional reforms, in 1906 praising those reforms as “the basic foundation of the Most Great Civilization.”¹³ When he saw that civil war and foreign intervention would prove unavoidably disastrous outcomes of the movement, he “could abide neither prospect,”¹⁴ and the policy of Bahá’í non-involvement in politics—in force among Bahá’ís to this day—was adopted. Bahá’u’lláh’s earlier prohibition against sedition was not a proscription against political involvement as such, but political realism made neutrality the better part of valor from 1907 onward.

There was contact between Afghání and Bábí circles. According to Nabíl, the first contact between Mirzá Malkum Khán and the Bahá’ís took place in late 1861, when he had fled to Baghdad, fearing for his safety at the displeasure of the Shah, who had ordered him out of the country. A particularly sensitive topic was the secret society Malkum had organized, the aforementioned “House of Oblivion,” which had aroused the Shah’s suspicion. Malkum’s escape to Baghdad, in pursuance of the Shah’s decree, would seem to have placed him out of immediate danger, were it not for the fact that Mirzá Buzurg Khán, the Persian consul in Baghdad, let out that he had been charged by his superiors to have Malkum Khán detained and escorted back to Iran, there to face an undisclosed fate. Fearing for his life, Malkum Khán came to Bahá’u’lláh, seeking protection. Bahá’u’lláh’s prudence dictated that to harbor Malkum Khán was against better judgment, and so he was lodged elsewhere. Entrusting him to the care of the Váli, Bahá’u’lláh sent Malkum Khán to the *Seraye*. The Váli eventually sent him safely off to Istanbul in the Spring of 1862 (Balyuzi, Bahá’u’lláh: *The King of Glory* 151–52). In this way, Bahá’u’lláh saved him from the clutches of the Persian consul.

In Istanbul, Malkum Khán again had occasion to contact Bahá’u’lláh and his followers when the exiles arrived there in May, 1863. When Ernest Renan met Malkum Khán in Istanbul in June, 1865, Malkum Khán represented himself as being an authority on the Bábí movement, so much so that Renan encouraged him to write a book on the subject (Momen, “The Bahá’í Influence” 49–50).

Ákhundzáda (1812–78)

Typical of Persian secular reformers, the Azarbayjání secularist Ákhundzáda was “one of the first thinkers of the constitutional era to question the compatibility of Islamic traditionalism with democratic constitutionalism” (Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 95). Ákhundzáda’s self-proclaimed mission was to arouse the Muslim nations from their torpor and to pursue the course of progress charted by European civilization. He threw caution to the wind and wrote boldly and perhaps rashly. His essays were deliberately provocative writing:

I perceived that Islamic faith and fanaticism represented an obstacle to the diffusion of civilization among the Muslim peoples. I therefore set myself the task of sundering the foundations of the faith, of extirpating fanaticism and dissipating the dark ignorance of the peoples of the East. (Quoted in Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 153)

He condemned *taqlíd* (following the rulings of a *mujtahid*) and *ijtihád* (the legal function of a *mujtahid*). “*Taqlíd* has ruined us,” he pined (quoted in Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 156). His religious model being the Protestant movement in Europe, he advocated laws protecting the rights of citizens. In 1863, Ákhundzáda delivered a tirade to a Persian crowd, saying: “Oh Iranians! If you could realize the advantage of liberty and human rights, you would

never have tolerated slavery and humility: you would have studied the sciences, set up societies, united your powers, and decided to save yourself from the tyranny of the despot” (quoted in Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 95).

Tálibzáda (1834–1911)

According to Dorraj, the writings of Tálibzáda increased the flow of Western ideas into Persia (Farmayan, “The Forces of Modernization” 142). In the past, according to Tálibzáda, Persians had “become Arabized by force,” but were “now becoming Europeanized by choice” (quoted in Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 96–97). Similarly, Tálibzáda’s anti-clerical attitude was in keeping with the views of his contemporary secularists, referring derogatorily to high-ranking divines as “God’s attorneys” wallowing in wordliness and hypocrisy (quoted in Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 140, 156–57). As to religion generally, Tálibzáda stated: “It is time for us . . . to learn to distinguish reform from innovation” (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 156). He considered a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral legislature the form of government best suited for Persia (Dorraj, *From Zarathustra* 95). He favored separation of Church and State and advocated a distinctive Persian national identity.

Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání (1853–96)

Around the turn of the twentieth century, prior to and during the Constitutional Revolution, a number of key advocates of constitutional reform were reportedly crypto-Azalí Bábís. To the extent that this may have been true, their affinity with Babism was more a nostalgia for the Báb and the early Bábís than an empathy with Bábí ideals (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 415). Among the professed Azalí Bábí reformers was Kirmání. Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání was a son-in-law of Subh-i-Azal.¹⁵ It was the celebrated Bábí—Hájí Sayyid Javád Karbalá’i—who had taught Kirmání the philosophies of Mulla Sadrá, Shaykh Ahmad Ahsá’i, and of the Báb (Bayat, “Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani” 65). Yet, according to Amanat, Kirmání’s “later modernist critiques of religion and society” were “influenced more by nineteenth-century European trends than by Bábí thought” (Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 415).

Kirmání “wrote abundantly but without system” (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 157). He was not just an Azalí—he claimed to be a Muslim, a Bábí, and an agnostic all at the same time. His major objective was to advance modern science and the use of reason, incompatible as he felt they were with religious truth. With surprising courage, Kirmání’s critique of the dominant Muslim institutions of his day was forthright to the point of being blunt. His conception of religious law was progressive—laws should address the exigencies of the day and as such are liable to revision as circumstances may require. Though anticlerical, though he scorned Arabs and traditional Islam, he would relapse into professions of orthodoxy to avoid at all costs the threat of *takfir* (charge of unbelief). Thus his writings “constitute a hopeless amalgam of the most disparate philosophical and social ideas” (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 156).

Sharply critical of the doctrine of *nájis* (ritual impurity/contamination), Kirmání argued that although the Qur’án honors Christians and Jews as “People of the Book,” yet the doctrine of *nájis* holds them to be unclean. This belief has precipitated Persia’s utter isolation from the outer world (Bayat, “Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani” 78). An erstwhile collaborator with the likes of Afghání and Malkum Khán, Kirmání made no secret about his Bábí sympathies. In condemnation of the bloody massacres of the Bábís, Kirmání exclaimed:

O people! What is their fault? . . . What is their crime? . . . You believed in Muhammad the Arab, they in Mirza Ali Muhammad the Bab. Whatever the former said, the latter also said. One brought the Koran, the other the Bayan. If the one’s verse was miraculously revealed in Arabic, the other’s was miraculously revealed in Arabic and Persian. What the Jews, Christians and Muslims say, they also say. Either all religions are right and correct, then theirs is right and correct; or all religions are wrong and lies, then theirs is also wrong and a lie. (Quoted in Bayat, “Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani” 71)

The Persians are castigated for the participation by all strata of society in torture and murder of the Bábís, carried out with an air of festivity and fanatical zeal.

Kirmání despised Islam and rejected it as an alien religion, the cause of all the cultural ills in Persia. Paradoxically, though preaching civil rights and universal reform, his writings were at the same time racist and given to irrational diatribes. He hailed the Báb as the redeemer whose destiny it was to liberate Persia, but this was not central to his reformist platform (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 160–61).

Persian Secular Reformists: A Summary

Divergent though these reformers were, yet they were of one accord with respect to their secular ideals. All of them shared a constitutional ideal. Ákhundzáda, in one of his essays, appealed to the Shah to liberalize his rule, to support

the reformers in their struggle against clerical, domination, and to promote secular education. Násiri'd-Dín Sháh did in fact appoint new ministers favorable to such reforms. Though Afghání and Malkum carefully couched their secular program in religious rhetoric, the three other reformers—Ákhundzáda, Kirmání, and Tálíbzáda—were forthright in their call for secularization. The secularists wished to see religion adapt itself to new social and cultural realities. These intellectuals were able to coalesce and mobilize a social movement, demanding curtailment of sacerdotal control over those institutions they wished to reform.

This is, in brief, the contemporary Persian backdrop before which the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh enacted their reforms. Ottoman reforms must likewise be kept in mind, but the Persian reformers are representative enough of the tenor of the times.

The Book of Certitude and Bábí Reform

The Book of Certitude was revealed at a time when Bahá'u'lláh was committed to the reform of the Bábí community. He was not, at that time, bent on the reform of Islam, Persia, or of the world for that matter, as the consolidation of the Bábí community was uppermost in his mind at the time, as attested by several autobiographical remarks. Practically by default, in the power vacuum created by Azal's inaccessibility, the need arose for an effective Bábí leader. Prompted by Azal's timorousness and ineffectuality as nominal chief of the Bábís, Bahá'u'lláh's post-exile (1856) role as leader—accepted with some reluctance—appears to have been solicited by certain of the Bábís themselves. The growth and expansion of the Bábí movement would scarcely have been possible without such leadership. This was, after all a movement missionary in its principles and goals. It had to carry on, to promote its own vision of reform, or suffer the fate of increasing marginalization.

In a sense it was advantageous that there later developed a power struggle between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal—each representing opposing reformist paradigms—for it precipitated a crisis in leadership and, from one perspective at least, brought about the emergence of that nucleus of believers from which the Bahá'í Faith sprang. A problem does arise in trying to reconstruct Bahá'u'lláh's sense of mission as it developed during the Baghdad period and determining at which point that sense of destiny took on clearly messianic overtones. Among several autobiographical remarks in *The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'u'lláh discloses:

In these days . . . odours of jealousy are diffused. . . . For a number of people who have never inhaled the fragrance of justice, have raised the standard of sedition, and have leagued themselves against Us. On every side We witness the menace of their spears, and in all directions We recognize the shafts of their arrows. (*The Book of Certitude* 249)

Although I never exalted myself over any one in any matter, nor sought for authority over any one; I associated with every one with the utmost affection, and (was) extremely patient and accessible, and with the poor was as the poor, and with the learned and great (I was) perfectly submissive and contented.¹⁶

I swear by God, the one true God! grievous as have been the woes and sufferings which the hand of the enemy and the people of the Book inflicted upon Us, yet all these fade into utter nothingness when compared with that which hath befallen Us at the hand of those who profess to be Our friends. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 250)

Perhaps a question that should be asked here concerns the intent of the passage: does Bahá'u'lláh wish to say that consolidation efforts within the Bábí community were met with ill-deserved opposition, due to rivalry? We can only speculate as to whether or not such machinations had the object of undermining Bahá'u'lláh's role as *de facto* leader only, or whether there was also a perception of Bahá'u'lláh's implicit theophanic claims and a negative reaction to them.

Bahá'u'lláh's Authority as Reformer

In the early Baghdad period, the fabric of the Bábí community was unravelling, and the need for consolidation was acute. The community could scarcely have sustained the pressure of a serious, confrontative messianic bid for leadership, nor could the community have easily adjusted to the test of any new doctrine. Such a leadership struggle would have undermined the fragile unity of the Bábís. Throughout the remainder of the Baghdad period, from 1856 to 1863, Bahá'u'lláh's efforts focused primarily on the reform and consolidation of the Bábí enclave. His declaration in 1863 was timely, as this source of fresh charisma became a rallying point for the Bábís. Even so, it precipitated a serious split among the Bábís in 1866. However, the assumption by Bahá'u'lláh of an unequivocal status of leadership among the Bábís had been in the offing for years prior. The Bábís were generally prepared to accept

Bahá'u'lláh as leader by virtue of the leadership Bahá'u'lláh had already exercised in steering the Bábí community away from its disastrous militarism to a pacifist orientation. Recalling the attempt on the life of the Shah by two Bábís on 15 August 1852 and the persecution that plagued Bábís as a consequence, Bahá'u'lláh remarks on his resolution, during the Siyáh-Chál incarceration (1852) and ever since, to reorient the Bábís in their aims and aspirations:

Day and night, while confined in that dungeon, We meditated upon the deeds, the condition, mid the conduct of the Bábís, wondering what could have led a people so high-minded, so noble, and of such intelligence, to perpetrate such an audacious and outrageous act against the person of His Majesty. This Wronged One, thereupon, decided to arise, after His release from prison, and undertake, with the utmost vigor, the task of regenerating this people.

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: “Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Ere long will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.”

And when this Wronged One went forth out of His prison, We journeyed, in pursuance of the order of His Majesty the Sháh—may God, exalted be He, protect him to ‘Iráq, escorted by officers in the service of the esteemed and honored governments of Persia and Russia. After Our arrival, We revealed, as a copious rain, by the aid of God and His Divine Grace and mercy, Our verses, and sent them to various parts of the world. We exhorted all men, and particularly this people, through Our wise counsels and loving admonitions, and forbade them to engage in sedition, quarrels, disputes and conflict. As a result of this, and by the grace of God, waywardness and folly were changed into piety and understanding, and weapons converted into instruments of peace. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 21–22)

The interposition of a dream report in this autobiographical narrative is significant. The dream report evidently reinforced Bahá'u'lláh's sense of mission as if assumed the stature of a divine commission. This dream legitimation with the consequent claim to having “revealed . . . Our verses” shows that Bahá'u'lláh could speak in distinctively theophanic terms while at the same time assume a tone of deference to the Shah. Retrospectively, it is clear that Bahá'u'lláh looked upon his leadership role in Iraq in terms of a God-given mission:

Upon Our arrival in ‘Iráq, We found the Cause of God sunk in deep apathy and the breeze of divine revelation stilled. Most of the believers were faint and dispirited, nay utterly lost and dead. Hence there was a second blast on the Trumpet, whereupon the Tongue of Grandeur uttered these blessed words: ‘We have sounded the Trumpet for the second time.’ Thus the whole world was quickened through the vitalizing breaths of divine revelation and inspiration. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Ishráqát in Tablets* 131)

According to this statement, there occurred what is otherwise referred to as the “Second Resurrection.” It was unbeknown until after Bahá'u'lláh's declaration, but I think the point being made here is that the Bábí community was in any event benefitting from leadership whose object was consolidation and Bábí reform.

Specific Bábí Reforms

In the aftermath of three bloody Bábí defensive battles [Shaykh Tabarsí, Nayríz, and Zanján] followed by the attempt on the life of the Shah (1852), Bahá'u'lláh adopted a quietist stance. His primary concern was for the Bábí community, faced with threats of internecine factionalism. Within its ranks, up to twenty-five Bábís entertained messianic pretensions in the leadership vacuum caused by Azal's absence. Bahá'u'lláh's quietist stance served to distance the Bábís from their revolutionary stigma by disavowing militarism altogether. To effect internal consolidation, Bahá'u'lláh urged moral reform. The moral consolidation of the Bábí community concentrated on the integrity of the individual but also had an impact on the collective Bábí response to State authority.

Bahá'u'lláh linked moral purity with spiritual sensitivity and was able to use the existing eschatological tension among Bábís for this end. This becomes evident in a section of *The Book of Certitude*, known among Bahá'ís as the “Tablet of the True Seeker.” Here, the ability to make sense of the cryptic quranic warnings concerning the *eschaton* is imparted only to the pure in heart, and this purity is conditioned on moral rectitude. Some elements of the moral dimension of Bahá'u'lláh's reformist teachings can be found in *The Book of Certitude* itself, which speaks of ethical preconditions to spiritual perspicuity:

Inner Purification

. . . O my brother, when a true seeker determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 192)

Detachment

He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth. . . . That seeker must at all times put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 192–93)

When the channel of the human soul is cleansed of all worldly and impeding attachments, it will unfailingly perceive the breath of the Beloved across immeasurable distances, and will, led by its perfume, attain and enter the City of Certitude. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 197)

Humility

He must never seek to exalt himself above any one, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory, most cling onto patience and resignation, observe silence, and refrain from idle talk. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 193)

Proscription against Backbiting

That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quenqueth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.

For the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endure a century. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 193)

Personal Piety

At the dawn of every day he should commune with God, and with all his soul persevere in the quest of his Beloved, He should consume every wayward thought with the flame of His loving mention, and, with the swiftness of lightning, pass by all else save Him. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 194)

Charity

He should succour the dispossessed, and never withhold his favour from the destitute. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 194)

Kindness to Animals

He should show kindness to animals, how much more unto his fellow-man, to him who is endowed with the power of utterance. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 194)

Martyrdom and Living Self-Sacrifice

He should not hesitate to offer up his life for his Beloved, nor allow the censure of the people to turn him away from the Truth. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 194)

Reciprocity

He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself, nor promise that which he doth not fulfil. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 194)

Forgiveness

With all his heart should the seeker avoid fellowship with evil doers, and pray for the remission of their sins. He should forgive the sinful, and never despise his low estate, for none knoweth what his own end shall be. How often hath a sinner, at the hour of death, attained to the essence of faith, and, quaffing the

immortal draught, hath taken his flight unto the celestial Concourse. And how often hath a devout believer, at the hour of his soul's ascension, been so changed as to fall into the nethermost fire. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* 194–95)

Historical Factors Favoring Bahá'u'lláh's Role as Legislator

Most of these precepts, which here are enunciated more on the order of moral admonitions, were codified eleven years later in Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* as part of the formal Bahá'í moral code. But the ethical precepts in *The Book of Certitude* are not distinctive from the standpoint of Bábí and later Bahá'í self-definition. What will soon emerge as the inchoate stage of a post-Islamic reform program was Bahá'u'lláh's express abrogation of holy war (*jihád*) upon his declaration in 1863. The post-declaration superimposition of Bahá'u'lláh's charismatic authority over that of Muhammad and the legislative prerogative in abrogating the laws of the latter had already been exercised by the Báb. Factors contributing to the break from Islam are analyzed by Amanat as follows:

The extent to which the teachings of the Báb and his disciples offered an alternative to the religion of the time can be demonstrated by the following factors. Foremost was the fact that Babism responded to the changing sociomoral climate by consciously incorporating the notion of recurring renewal into the body of religious doctrine; something that the orthodox Shi'ite establishment (and the later Islamic reformers of all persuasions) tended to reject or ignore. In introducing the theme of progressive revelation, the Báb benefited from the dynamics of the Bātinī theory of cyclical manifestations.

Hence the religion of the Bayān employed the old symbols of Shi'ism in order to offer a fresh answer to an equally old tension within that religion. The earlier currents of Bātinī thought, with very few exceptions, rarely exceeded the claim to the individual deputyship of the Hidden Imam. Only in Shaykhism, preoccupation with the Imam's this-worldly whereabouts subjected his existence to a historical process that ultimately was to culminate in his Advent.

The Báb sought the solution to the dichotomy of the Shi'ite Imamate: the simultaneous presence and absence of the Imam, in the outward declaration of Mahdihood and its logical corollary, the Qiyāma. This revolutionary step set the Bábís on the road to a complete break from Islam and the creation of a new religious dispensation. The mind that conceived this break, and set about to achieve it, though primarily religious, shared the modernity of a secular mind as it traced the stagnation of the community not in the irreversible fate of its members but in their failure to see the incompatibility of their past religious values with the reality of a new era. Before the introduction of Western ideologies would definitively revise the ideals of reform, this was the only answer generated in nineteenth-century Shi'ite Iran which coped with the threat of an alien and materially superior culture without resorting to rejectionism or falling prey to complacency. (*Resurrection and Renewal* 406–7)

The almost counterpointed themes in Bábí theology, which made possible a reformist break from Islam, are suggested by Amanat in this paradigm:

The three themes of progressive revelation, conditional recognition of temporal authority, and this-worldliness of human salvation were in contrast to the Islamic precepts of the finality of Islam, the totality of the prophetic authority, and the otherworldliness of the Qiyāma. (*Resurrection and Renewal* 408)

The theme of progressive revelation effectively overcame the dogma of the finality of revelation vested in Muhammad. It was necessary that a counterdoctrine be formulated in Islamic terms so that a new revelatory claim could not be rejected out of hand, if the argument for the possibility of future revelations had any power to persuade.

The quietist Bábí reforms that Bahá'u'lláh legislated and effected were—from the standpoint of prevailing Islamic ethical norms—unremarkable yet necessary. These reforms did reflect a traditionally Shi'í compromise with temporal authority, except for the fact that such authority was viewed as conferred by God and not by the Hidden Imám, who was no longer hidden. But, beyond Shiism itself, Bahá'u'lláh went so far as to acknowledge that temporal power derived its legitimacy from God. In a lengthy tablet to the Shi'í cleric Áqá Najafí, Bahá'u'lláh states:

Every nation must have a high regard for the position of its sovereign, must be submissive unto him, must carry out his behests, and hold fast his authority. The sovereigns of the earth have been and are the manifestations of the power, the grandeur and the majesty of God.¹⁷

The emphasis on individual piety was critical to the survival of the community, since, if unchecked, individual Bábís could imperil the community. The Bábí uprisings and the assassination attempt on the Shah indelibly stigmatized the Bábís as revolutionaries. This stigma, largely justified at first but later contradicted by explicit Bahá'í policy, was to plague the Bahá'í community down to the present. Until the end of his life, Bahá'u'lláh took pains to reconcile Bahá'ís with their persecutors and jailers.

With an emphasis on this-worldliness of salvation, moral responsibility was more immediate. Eschatological judgment was no longer deferred. Bábís were given an acute sense of eschatological moment, and of immediate consequence, which went a long way towards effectively facilitating Bábí reform.

Bahá'u'lláh and Persian Reform

Once stability was restored to the Bábí community and the post-1866 Bahá'í diaspora consolidated, thought and energy could be turned to the pressing questions of Persian reform. Careful to keep a distance from seditionists, the leaders of the Bahá'í community, on principle, supported constitutionalism. This did not, however, entail supporting avowed constitutionalists, most of whom advocated change through revolution. This conflicted with Bahá'u'lláh's paradigm for social change, that is, social transformation under duly constituted authority.

It would appear that Bahá'u'lláh reflected, to a degree, some of the trends of thought that characterized constitutionalism and the drive towards governmental reform. With reference to the intellectual orientation common to constitutionalists of the period, as identified by Dorraj, Bahá'í reformist policy presents some shared characteristics (*From Zarathustra* 98–99). To a certain extent Bahá'í policy could be expressed in terms of secular nationalism, but such policy was not restricted to the particular interests vested in Persian reform.

Dorraj rightly points out a fairly obvious fact that a “pervasive feature of political thought of the constitutional era is its social reformist character” (*From Zarathustra* 98). The committed reformists and modernists of the period were inspired by the example of Western civilization, which was largely taken as a model, either intact (by secularists) or Islamicized (by Muslim modernists). Science and rationalism were perceived as tools for liberation from forces of ignorance and poverty.

In any event, Bahá'u'lláh departed considerably from the fashionable anti-imperial rhetoric and supported the monarchy both in practice as well as in principle. This outspoken posture, aligning the Bahá'í community as the loyal subjects of sovereigns no matter how despotic, often alienated reformists from Bahá'í leaders who had experienced the cruel State-sanctioned consequences of unpremeditated Bábí sedition.

Bahá'u'lláh made public his preference for constitutional monarchy, on the order of the British model. His advocacy of constitutional monarchy notwithstanding, Bahá'u'lláh did not have perfect control over the promulgation of his reforms by Bahá'ís themselves. Prior to 1893, in the copy of the *Lawh-i-Bishárát*, which the Bahá'ís had sent to Orientalist Baron Rosen, “the Bahá'ís appear to have thought it expedient to suppress,” Browne relates, “. . . the 15th and last clause, recommending constitutional government” (Browne, *The New History* xxv, n. 1).

Another characteristic of intellectual thought in this period of Persian ferment was anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiment, neither of which does justice to Bahá'u'lláh's policy profile. As against these sentiments that burned within Ákhundzáda and Kirmání, and to a lesser extent Malkum Khán and Tálíbzáda, the most that could be admitted of Bahá'í policy is that a strong anti-clerical strain can be seen to pervade Bahá'u'lláh's writings. At the same time, it must be conceded that Bahá'u'lláh was supportive of clerical leadership if its viability for progressive reform could be exploited. Bahá'í reform expressed itself in terms of an extended Islamic argument, beginning with the almost Meccan preoccupation with eschatological self-inventory and stretching across the religious gamut through nation-referenced (rather than nationalist) reformist concerns to a Medinan statesmanship bordering on the secular.

The Legislative Break with Islam

Amanat, summing up the successive stages of Bábí- Bahá'í reform, states:

In the aftermath of the Babi persecutions of 1852 and the exile to Iraq, Bahá'u'lláh gradually transformed the messianic militancy of the Babis into a pacifist, largely nonpolitical current. . . . The social message of the new faith spilled over the bounds of the Babi religion and implied in its universalism, a greater reconciliation with the needs of the modern secular world. Increasingly in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Bahá'í social doctrine tended to distance itself from its own Shi'ite origin and move in the direction of modern morality and ethics. The Babi legacy was no doubt crucial in the way the Bahá'ís were able to adopt this essentially non-Islamic outlook. (*Resurrection and Renewal* 414)

The continuity of Bahá'u'lláh's thought with Shí'í, Shaykhí, and Bábí thought is, in many respects, thoroughgoing and rich. I have not dwelt on such affinities—doctrinal as well as lawful—for this study has not sought to adduce parallels to assess degrees of influence. Of greater moment, in the present writer's opinion, are Bahá'u'lláh's actual departures from Islam, in the wake of the decisive and irreversible break of the former from the latter. Indeed, the first major legislative break from Islam that Bahá'u'lláh effected was his first legislative act as a declared Manifestation of God. This was the abrogation of *jihád*.

In a recent publication, Heshmat Moayyad has endeavored to “delineate the points of separation between Muslim and Bahá'í *communities*” (“The Historical Interrelationship” 76). Moayyad has singled out the following legislative categories (“The Historical Interrelationship” 82–85). I have added more. Remarks on each are my own, unless indicated otherwise:

Abrogation of *jihád*

Reportedly, the abrogation of *jihád* was Bahá'u'lláh's initial act of legislation at the time of his declaration in Baghdad in 1863—though in what way this pronouncement was related to his declaration is not known (Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, of Bahá'u'lláh 1:278). A widely circulated and representative statement on the abolition by Bahá'u'lláh of holy war is found in his *Lawh-i-Bishárát* (Tablet of Glad Tidings):

The first Glad Tidings

which the Mother Book hath, in this Most Great Revelation, imparted unto all the peoples of the world is that the law of holy war hath been blotted out from the Book. Glorified be the All-Merciful, the Lord of grace abounding, through Whom the door of heavenly bounty hath been flung open in the face of all that are in heaven and on earth. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 21)

MacEoin has brought together those statements by Bahá'u'lláh that carry forward the traditional Islamic distinction between the “Greater *Jihád*” of the soul's struggle against the forces of darkness and the “Lesser *Jihád*” being actual warfare itself (MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha'ism” 228). However, MacEoin fails to note the purely poetic retention of the term so far as Bahá'u'lláh is concerned, for the comparison becomes exclusionary the moment holy war has been “blotted out from the Book.” There is no longer a “greater” or “lesser” *jihád*, only a terminologically redefined “true *jihád*” (MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha'ism” 228). Bahá'u'lláh's authority to effect this and other changes vis-à-vis Islam derived in part from the force of his personal charisma, but what really legitimized Bahá'u'lláh's authority in the eyes of many of his followers was *The Book of Certitude* itself.

Abrogation of Slavery

Though a practice abandoned by modern Islam, slavery was still prevalent in the nineteenth century. The Qur'án enjoins believers to treat their slaves well (4:36), though it encourages the freeing of slaves (90:13). Islamic tradition and law, however, freely permitted female slaves to be used as concubines, though offspring of these liaisons were considered freeborn, enjoying equal rights of inheritance with other children of the master of the house. In Islamic history, Egypt was ruled for some 250 years by slave-kings (the Mamluks).¹⁸

In his Tablet to Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh praised the abolition of slavery: “It hath reached us that thou hast forbidden the selling of slaves and handmaidens: this is what God hath commanded in this marvellous Manifestation. God hath recorded unto thee the reward of this” (Tablet to Queen Victoria, partially translated in Browne, *Selections* 276). In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, slavery is expressly forbidden:

It is unlawful for you to buy or sell maid-servants and youths. One creature must not purchase another, since this is prohibited in the Tablet of God. Thus was the matter inscribed by the Pen of Justice through Grace.

No one should glory over another. All are slaves to Him. . . . (Bahá'u'lláh, *Al-Kitáb al-Aqdas* 43)

Abrogation of the Category of *nájis*

I do not know if the reader has ever experienced the refusal of some (but not most) Muslims in the West to shake hands with non-Muslims, for the very reason that the latter are considered unclean (*nájis*). Here, of course, is the overt avoidance of contamination—hence the reluctance to engage in the Western form of exchanging greetings. But a wide variety of other substances and situations are also considered unclean. Of itself, this is a legitimate part of the practice of certain forms of Islam to some extent, but it seems that Bahá'u'lláh saw this as a divisive factor between Muslims and non-Muslims. Presumably because *nájis* reflects a pervasive psychological distance or attitudinal

barrier in the path of unity, Bahá'u'lláh has done away with this category—and consciousness—of *nájis*, utterly (Universal House of Justice, *Synopsis and Codification* 48, 2K; Mázandarání, *Amr va khalq* 3:302).

Abrogation of *mut'ah* (Temporary “Marriage”)

Moayyad comments that temporary marriage is an institution “which the Shí'í 'ulamá relentlessly defend and try to uphold” (Moayyad, “The Historical Interrelationship” 84). The Bahá'í Faith has forbidden this practice (*Ishtaráq Khávarí, Ganjínih-i hudúd va ahkám* 178).

Abrogation of *taqiyya*

Dissimulation or outward recantation of one's faith was permitted in life-threatening situations in Shí'í Islam ever since al Mansúr's campaign against the 'Alids and their supporters at the time of the Sixth Imám, Ja'far Sádiq (d. 148/ 765) (Momen, *Shi'i Islam* 39). In Shí'í practice, according to Rahman, “it became a cardinal principle to dissimulate belief, not only under direct and express danger to life but in a generally hostile environment. Further, such dissimulation is not merely allowed, it is an obligatory duty of a fundamental order” (Rahman, *Islam* 172; cited by Moayyad, “The Historical Interrelationship” 84–85).

Bahá'u'lláh enjoined absolute truthfulness under all circumstances. A corollary to this requirement received an interesting comment by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who stated that to speak the truth, even if it be blasphemy, is superior to dissimulation (Mázandarání, *Amr va khalq* 3:148–49).

Abrogation of the Sacerdotal Order

There is no provision for a priesthood in Bahá'í law. Bahá'u'lláh has expressly abolished it (Universal House of Justice, *Synopsis* 47).

Abrogation of *irtidád* (Apostasy)

On this matter, Moayyad states: “Freedom of religion renders the concept of apostasy, *irtidád*, incomprehensible and meaningless to Bahá'ís, a concept that legitimizes the execution of so many blameless individuals even today” (“The Historical Interrelationship” 84). The pursuit of world order characterizes a major social thrust in Bahá'u'lláh's program of reform. The global reform Bahá'u'lláh had envisioned is largely up to world leaders to execute. The fortunes of Islam are neither central to this vision, nor even of nominal concern. Bahá'u'lláh's reforms are definitely post-Islamic. Indeed, according to Islamicist Bürgel, the only Islamic parallel to Bahá'u'lláh's reforms are to be found in the Moghul emperor Akbar the Great:

As for Islam, I only emphasize one final point that is of vital importance for the adherents of the Bahá'í Faith. Islamic law inflicts capital punishment on those who fall away from Islam and thereby commit the sin of apostasy (*irtidád*). . . .

Thus, we see that Islam as a legal system, notwithstanding a certain tendency to tolerance, did not transcend those borderlines . . . between believers and non-believers, religion and heresy, *dín* and *kufír*, which place the nonbeliever into a status of non-person or un-person who has the choice between either accepting your religion or being killed in the name of your God. This was and is the legal position of Islam, although it has been mitigated in the majority of Islamic countries by the introduction of modern constitutions. However, Islamic law has been or is being reinstated in a number of Islamic countries. A draft for an Islamic constitution recently elaborated by al-Azhar University contains a paragraph on apostasy that calls for capital punishment. . . . Nevertheless, the aforementioned borderline has been transcended in an Islamic movement of the highest ethical impact—Islamic mysticism. . . .

However, these tendencies remained more or less private. The only official breakthrough, the only large-scale historical self-transcendence of Islam happened under the Moghul emperor Akbar the Great in the second half of the sixteenth century. Akbar installed a monotheistic religion (*dín-i iláhi*); decreed a general peace (*sulh-i kull*) between the various believers, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Zoroastrians; annulled the taxes for non Muslims; and built a house of worship (*'ibádat kháne*) where learned men of all religions assembled to discuss theological issues. These measures may have had political reasons as well, but they primarily sprang from true religious sentiments. . . .

It seems to me that Akbar's experiment is a sort of precursor of what Bahá'u'lláh intended with his idea of general peace. (Bürgel, “The Bahá'í Attitude” 20–21)

To be fair, there is no single “Islamic” position on many important issues. Regarding apostasy, Cole points

out, “Lots of Islamic liberals reject the strict clerical ideas on *irtidád*, including, e.g., past Pakistani supreme court justices” (Personal communication, 9 August 1991).

The Bahá’í break from Islam underwent conceptual and then legislative stages. This distancing from Islam was reflected increasingly in the consciousness of the believers. A Bahá’í today looks upon Islam much as a Christian looks upon the so-called Old Testament. This parallel is both reinforced and weakened by the fact that the Qur’án forms no part of Bahá’í scripture. Though the writings of the Báb do form part of the voluminous corpus of Bahá’í holy writ, the doctrinal authority of those writings is relatively weak. To a certain extent, some of the laws of the Báb have retained their authority only because of Bahá’u’lláh’s ratification or adoption of important Bábí carryovers. These carryovers represent what MacEoin has termed “conflation” of the Bábí and Bahá’í religions (MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha’ism” 238–43). Among those elements of the Bahá’í Faith that are not reducible to Bábí thought and which have only limited parallel in nineteenth-century Islamic modernist reforms are the world reforms both advocated and legislated by Bahá’u’lláh.

Bahá’u’lláh as “World Reformer”

The Islamic background of the Bahá’í Faith largely accounts for much of the tenor of Bahá’í thought but does not wholly explain its non-Islamic content and worldview. This interplay of Islamic and non-Islamic elements is difficult to sort out, but the result of this ideological transformation was, in any event, the emergence of an independent world religion. Scholarship has naturally come to identify the obvious Islamic components of Bahá’í thought, but scholarship has yet to describe adequately the historical and religions metamorphosis of Bahá’í ideology from its ideological chrysalis. Browne has tried to sort out the implications of this interplay of Islamic and non-Islamic elements in the following observation:

At the present day, therefore, the vast majority of Bábí are Bahá’ís, whose doctrines, sentiments, and ideals are already far removed from those of the primitive Bábí or modern Ezelís.

No sooner was Behá [Bahá’u’lláh] firmly established in his authority than he began to make free use of the privilege accorded by the Báb to “Him whom God shall manifest” to abrogate, change, cancel, and develop the earlier doctrines, His chief aim seems to have been to introduce a more settled order, to discourage speculation, to direct the attention of his followers to practical reforms pursued in a prurient and unobtrusive fashion, to exalt ethics at the expense of metaphysics, to check mysticism, to conciliate existing authorities, including even the Sháh of Persia, the Nero of the Bábí faith, to abolish useless, unpractical, and irksome regulations and restrictions, and, in general, to adapt the religion at the head of which he now found himself to the ordinary exigencies of life, and to render it more capable of becoming, what he intended to make it, a universal system suitable to all mankind.

A remembrance of all the wrongs which he and his co-religionists had suffered at the hands of the Musulmáns further caused him gradually but steadily to eliminate the tinge of Muhammadan, and more especially of Shi’ite, thought which the Bábí doctrine still maintained, while ever seeking a better understanding with the Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, with all of whom he recommended his followers consort on friendly terms. (Browne, *The New History* xxv)

MacEoin has brought together a number of important texts for reconstructing the nature of Bahá’u’lláh’s reforms within the Bábí community (“Babism to Baha’ism” 221–29). But the picture MacEoin gives of Bahá’u’lláh’s religious convictions is reductionist in the extreme. His analyses fail to detect any originality on Bahá’u’lláh’s part, such that the latter’s program of world reform is less than the sum of its parts. We are asked to believe that Bahá’u’lláh was everywhere influenced by Sufis, by Christian missionaries in Adrianople, and so on, such that ultimately, in MacEoin’s view:

Already strongly influenced by Christian ideas from an early period, and having been in contact with European missionaries in Edirne, he [Bahá’u’lláh] seems to have come increasingly under the spell of western concepts then current in the Ottoman empire. His later writings, particularly those composed in Acre, show a growing concern with themes such as constitutional government, world peace, disarmament, collective security, a world legislature, an international language and script, free association between members of different religions and races, and so on—ideas which he grafted rather awkwardly onto existing Islamic theories, in common with a number of reformers of his period. (“Babism to Baha’ism” 227)

From this kind of analysis, Bahá'u'lláh, as a thinker and reformer, dissolves into a matrix of successive and rather passive influences. The dynamic of Bahá'u'lláh as a charismatic figure doubtless inspires Bahá'ís from Muslim as well as other backgrounds, who then accept his program for a new world order. But the vision itself has its own power to inspire. For whatever reasons, Bahá'u'lláh's reforms persisted, while those of his contemporaries exerted limited degrees of local or regional influence within the Islamic world, but not outside of it. Bahá'u'lláh inspired a reformist vision that none of the putative influences on Bahá'u'lláh were capable of producing.

The problem of constructing a psychohistory apart, I think it is a patent "Orientalist" assumption to interpret any contact with the Occident by Orientals as always resulting in the influence of the latter by the former. In many cases, perhaps in most, this may be so. There is also the possibility that Bahá'u'lláh could have been so influenced, but to assert is not to prove. The burden of proof rests with MacEoin that Bahá'u'lláh was spellbound by the West and that this "Westoxication" led to his reformist efforts.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that Bahá'u'lláh sought to reverse the direction of influence, by addressing epistles (individual and collective)—in a rather forceful, theophanic voice—to the reigning potentates of his day, in Europe and West Asia. Bahá'í author George Townshend makes an interesting observation that must have enjoyed the implicit editorial endorsement of Shoghi Effendi: "Bahá'u'lláh from the beginning seems to have realized the special capacity of the progressive and enterprising West. He took the most vigorous steps possible to bring the Truth of the Age to the knowledge of the West and its leaders" (Introduction, *God Passes By* vi). If this observation is even partially true, it is a penetrating analysis into the breadth of Bahá'u'lláh's reformist horizon, which overleapt Islamic boundaries. Bahá'u'lláh's global reformist agenda surpasses the Islamic mindset in scope and may, from a certain point of view, represent the sacralization of typically secular concerns. Some of these reforms may be illustratively described as follows.

The Critique of Civilization and the Prophecy on Nuclear Weapons

Beyond his progressivist theophanology, Bahá'u'lláh formulated a theory of civilization. *The Book of Certitude* had served to consolidate Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual authority in the missionary process. The expression of this divine prerogative is worked into the language of practically every major act of legislation. Typical of this kind of reformist articulation predicated on divine authority is the passage below, which sets the tone for Bahá'u'lláh's laws:

The word of God which the Supreme Pen hath recorded on the *ninth leaf* of the Most Exalted Paradise is this: In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil. Consider the civilization of the West, how it hath agitated and alarmed the peoples of the world. An infernal engine hath been devised, and hath proved so cruel a weapon of destruction that its like none hath ever witnessed or heard. The purging of such deeply-rooted and overwhelming corruptions cannot be effected unless the peoples of the world unite in pursuit of one common aim and embrace one universal faith. Incline your ears unto the Call of this Wronged One and adhere firmly to the Lesser Peace.

Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth but they are hidden from the minds and the understanding of men. These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 69)

Bahá'ís detect in these words a chilling foreboding of the invention of nuclear weapons. On ideological grounds, the worldview advanced here goes beyond a sense of utilitarian or fraternal commonality. The structural solution to which Bahá'u'lláh refers envisions a remapping of religious boundaries ("one universal faith") and consolidation of international efforts in pursuance of some kind of global agenda ("pursuit of one common aim"). There is a conflation here between what Bahá'u'lláh terms the "Lesser Peace" (or, the "Great Peace") and his utopian vision of a global spiritual culture and international political order (elsewhere called the "Most Great Peace"). In other writings on the subject of the Great Peace, Bahá'u'lláh promotes a conscious movement towards transnational and interreligious cooperation. This process, according to the developmental stages of world transformation Bahá'u'lláh envisions, will eventually lead into a federation of nations, the constitutional principles of which will in some form reflect the Bahá'í reformist agenda. The source of spiritual authority calling the world to a new order is Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, expressed in this particular passage as a divine inscription upon "the ninth leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise."

Bahá'u'lláh's critique of the West is not atypical of Islam itself but is atypical of nineteenth-century Islamic modernism, when "Westoxication" rendered Western ideas intellectually fashionable for a certain period of time. The much-vaunted scientific achievements of the West proved no guarantor of moral progress, as the persecution of Jews in Europe attests:

At present the light of reconciliation is dimmed in most countries and its radiance extinguished while the fire of strife and disorder hath been kindled and is blazing fiercely. Two great powers who regard themselves as the founders and leaders of civilization and the framers of constitutions have risen up against the followers of the Faith associated with Him Who conversed with God [Moses]. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 170)

Here, in Bahá'u'lláh's advocacy for human rights for Jewish minorities, we see the same moral critique of Europe on the basis of its anti-Jewish pogroms. Another critique, which may or may not have had Europe specifically in mind, was expressed as a general principle on the question of freedom. The Bahá'í writings support the ideals of liberty, but not libertinism. The extreme form of liberty is anarchy, which society must keep in check. The principle of the surrender of a measure of personal freedom for the sake of the common weal informs Bahá'í law as well. On the dangers of unbridled exercise of personal freedom, Bahá'u'lláh has written:

Consider the pettiness of men's minds. They ask for that which injureth them, and cast away the thing that profiteth them. . . . We find some men desiring liberty [*hurriya*], and priding themselves therein. Such men are in the depths of ignorance.

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing. Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which besemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance. . . .

Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. . . .

Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.²⁰

Cole sees in this passage an oblique critique of French *liberté*, in all its connotations of libertinism (Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism" 15). Islamicists Goldziher, Browne, and others had grossly misinterpreted this passage. In other writings, Bahá'u'lláh clearly approves of political liberty in the context of democracy.

At the level of global reform, Bahá'u'lláh is not specifically concerned with the rehabilitation of the fortunes of Islam. There is no harking back to lost glory, no appeal to quranic foreshadowings of modern times. The title of influence turns in Bahá'u'lláh's efforts to work outside the pale of Islam. The West becomes the new mission field, the grand social experiment. What is Bahá'u'lláh's reformist message in this context? First of all, the prophetological content of *The Book of Certitude* remains intact and is reasserted in various ways in virtually every major legislative act, each articulated with Bahá'u'lláh's signature of eschatological authority. Moreover, since Bahá'u'lláh devotes a good part of Part One to New Testament apocalyptic, *The Book of Certitude* already had the potential for a partial appeal to a Western audience. It did in fact make some inroads in the spiritual culture of turn-of-the-century North America, when popular religiosity expressed a thirst for non-normative, occult, and Eastern forms of spirituality. The first mention of Bahá'u'lláh in North America occurred in the historic 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

In principle, the Bahá'í kerygma was strong on social justice. This derives from Bahá'u'lláh's concern for justice, as expressed in *The Hidden Words* of Bahá'u'lláh, a collection of ethical aphorisms revealed in the Baghdad period. Rather than looking culturally inward, Bahá'u'lláh directed his efforts towards the development of an international order. It was not enough for Islam to "catch up" with the West, nor for the West to spiritualize itself through the East. There was a level of interaction that should govern and restrain the behavior of nations. One might say that Bahá'u'lláh anticipated the need for world order through the normalization of international relations and its regulation under international law. The interiorization of legislated peace—peace within the human heart—would arise from personal integrity, widened by the inculcation of global-mindedness. The consciousness of the oneness of humankind forms the bedrock of Bahá'í reformist agenda. The structural dynamic of the realization of peace entails a certain degree of relinquishing national sovereignties in support of world government.

Global Disarmament and Collective Security

Bahá'u'lláh's principle of collective security has quranic precedent (Cole, personal communication, 9 Aug. 1991), yet its internationalist formulation represents a transformation of that principle. I am not aware of any contemporary Islamic reformer—or at least of any Persian reformer—who had advocated something similar to the disarmament strategy proposed by Bahá'u'lláh below:

The Great Being, wishing to reveal the prerequisites of the peace and tranquillity of the world and the advancement of its peoples, hath written: The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men. Such a peace demandeth that the Great Powers should resolve, for the sake of the tranquillity of the peoples of the earth, to be fully reconciled among themselves. Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him. If this be done, the nations of the world will no longer require any armaments, except for the purpose of preserving the security of their realms and of maintaining internal order within their territories. This will ensure the peace and composure of every people, government and nation. We fain would hope that the kings and rulers of the earth, the mirrors of the gracious and almighty name of God, may attain unto this station, and shield mankind from the onslaught of tyranny. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 165)

That such a teaching was articulated within a religious rather than secular context is significant. The historical context was Islamic. Many of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are best understood within that context. Context is not content, and much of the content of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings represents an originality of emphasis, if not of intrinsic religious vision and legislation.

Universal Language

One such move towards increased international conciliation involves an important matter of practicality: communication. In his last major work, the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (1890), Bahá'u'lláh recounts an episode in his personal life that illustrates his thinking on the thorny social problem of linguistic dissonance:

One day, while in Constantinople, Kamál Páshá visited this Wronged One. Our conversation turned upon topics profitable unto man. He said that he had learned several languages. In reply We observed: "You have wasted your life. It beseemeth you and the other officials of the Government to convene a gathering and choose one of the divers languages, and likewise one of the existing scripts, or else to create a new language and a new script to be taught children in schools throughout the world. They would, in this way, be acquiring only two languages, one their own native tongue, the other the language in which all the peoples of the world would converse. Were men to take fast hold on that which hath been mentioned, the whole earth would come to be regarded as one country, and the people would be relieved and freed from the necessity of acquiring and teaching different languages." When in Our presence, he acquiesced, and even evinced great joy and complete satisfaction. We then told him to lay this matter before the officials and ministers of the Government, in order that it might be put into effect throughout the different countries. However, although he often returned to see Us after this, he never again referred to this subject, although that which had been suggested is conducive to the concord and the unity of the peoples of the world. (*Epistle* 137–38)

According to this self-disclosure, Bahá'u'lláh's thinking on global reform commenced no later than the Constantinople period (AH 1280/AD 1863). Considering Bahá'u'lláh's focus on Bábí reform just months earlier, the transition from that limited purview to a global reformist context is rather sudden. True, the vocation of an Islamic Mahdist figure was clearly to "fill the earth with justice and equity," but the thinking that must have preceded Bahá'u'lláh's reformist objectives—which were already crystallizing in 1863—had to reach back prior to this time. Even a year or two earlier is enough to synchronize the formative period of Bahá'u'lláh's reformist thinking with all of the attendant eschatological presuppositions as developed in *The Book of Certitude*.

One natural, even predictable, venue of reform for Bahá'u'lláh to have considered was Persia. Bahá'u'lláh never really abandoned his hopes for Persia and was at sundry junctures in his writings declaratively partial to that homeland. He expressed the hope that Persia might take an interest in certain of his reforms, the provenance of which was inconsequential compared with the greater good. He wrote:

We fain would hope that the Persian Government will adopt it [universal language] and carry it out. At present, a new language and a new script have been devised, if thou desirest, We will communicate them to thee. Our purpose is that all men may cleave unto that which will reduce unnecessary labor and exertion, so that their days may be befittingly spent and ended.

. . . O Shayikh! Seek thou the shore of the Most Great Ocean, and enter, then, the Crimson Ark which God hath ordained in the Qayyúm-i-Asmá for the people of Bahá.²¹ Verily, it passeth over land and sea. He that entereth therein is saved, and he that turneth aside perisheth. Shouldst thou enter therein and attain unto it, set thy face towards the Kaaba of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, and say: “O my God! I beseech Thee by Thy most glorious light, and all Thy lights are verily glorious.” Thereupon, will the doors of the Kingdom be flung wide before thy face, and thou wilt behold what eyes have never beheld, and hear what ears have never heard. (*Epistle* 138–40)

As the reader can see, the exhortation towards adopting an international language is far from secular. The soteriological exclamation immediately following the topic of language reform contextualizes the teaching as a religious one and forms part of the consciousness of Bahá’í “salvation.” At one time Bahá’u’lláh had expressed his personal preference for Arabic as a universal language.²² But the particular reference in the above passage to a language and script that Bahá’u’lláh had in his possession is one of the historical mysteries of Bahá’í history. This script and, presumably, an invented language, have both been lost. The offer to present this language was one of many unrequited and sometimes thwarted gestures on Bahá’u’lláh’s part. It was doubtful, anyway, that the very regimes (the collusion of Persian and Ottoman) responsible for Bahá’u’lláh’s imprisonment and exile of nearly forty years’ duration would have responded to and acted upon the reforms of one of their own prisoners.

The exhortation immediately following the proposal for language reform is eschatologically charged in soteriological terms. Throughout all his post-Baghdad writings, Bahá’u’lláh sustains this association: exhortation followed by authority proclamations couched in eschatological imagery. Emphasis on one universal language is a recurring theme in Bahá’u’lláh’s reformist platform. Once again, I believe this is not seen in contemporary pan-Arabism, and the very nature of this particular reform agenda distances it typologically from even Islamic secularism:

Likewise He [the Great Being] saith: Among the things which are conducive to unity and concord and will cause the whole earth to be regarded as one country is that the divers languages be reduced to one language and in like manner the scripts used in the world be confined to a single script. It is incumbent upon all nations to appoint some men of understanding and erudition to convene a gathering and through joint consultation choose one language from among the varied existing languages, or create a new one, to be taught to the children in all the schools of the world.

The day is approaching when all the peoples of the world will have adopted one universal language and one common script. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 165–66)

Bahá’u’lláh discusses a wide range of global concerns in his writings. One of those concerns touches on one of the potential solutions to world hunger: agrarian reform. This attention to practical reform is also a characteristic of his reformist pursuits.

Agrarian Reform

There are some indications that Bahá’u’lláh had looked to the West in terms of its applied technology. The look backward to Persia occurs with some frequency in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, as if his world reforms should have first been tried there. This kind of attention to Persia is Persian reformism, but not restricted to it nor defined by it. One example of this is Bahá’u’lláh’s concern with agriculture:

Fifth: Special regard must be paid to agriculture. Although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others. Agriculture is highly developed in foreign lands, however in Persia it hath so far been grievously neglected. It is hoped that His Majesty the Sháh—may God assist him by His grace—will turn his attention to this vital and important matter. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 90)

The advanced agricultural technology in foreign lands referred to here has the West in mind, held up as a technological and policy model for Persia to emulate. Cole sees this passage in the context of the Tobacco Revolt of 1890–1892, in which the Shah granted a Tobacco concession to a British company and thereby incited a popular revolt. Alluding to it, Bahá’u’lláh, by the very fact of his advice, admonishes the Shah for having failed to develop Persian agriculture (Cole, “Iranian Millenarianism” 18). As the particular events that led Bahá’u’lláh to address the Shah directly on this issue recede into history, the primacy given to agrarian reform remains a latent principle awaiting its application under presumed future conditions of Bahá’í influenced civic and State policy. Given the global scope of the “Tablet of the World,” here the question of Persian reform, though singled out with a

specific counsel to the Shah, is subsumed under the context of world reform. Cole observes that Bahá'u'lláh “demonstrates a strong Iranian patriotism, despite his internationalist sentiments” and that Bahá'u'lláh “lamented the loss of Iran’s ancient position as a world center of knowledge and polite culture, and its descent into a self-destructive fractiousness” (Cole, “Iranian Millenarianism” 17). Perhaps the fact that his efforts at Persian reform met with frustration further motivated Bahá'u'lláh to turn his reformist vision to wider horizons. He expresses regret over Persia’s lost opportunity:

If these obstructing veils had not intervened Persia would, in some two years, have been subdued through the power of utterance, the position of both the government and the people would have been raised and the Supreme Goal, unveiled and unconcealed, would have appeared in the plenitude of glory. In short, sometimes in explicit language, at other times by allusion, We said whatever had to be said. Thus, once Persia had been rehabilitated, the sweet savours of the Word of God would have wafted over all countries, inasmuch as that which hath streamed forth from the Most Exalted Pen is conducive to the glory, the advancement and education of all the peoples and kindreds of the earth. Indeed it is the sovereign remedy for every disease, could they but comprehend and perceive it. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 73)

We have no indications as to what conditions existed in Persia that, in Bahá'u'lláh’s estimation, could have had so decisive a potential influence over the West and the rest of the world. The reference to “two years” is also unexplained. We can conclude from this passage only that Bahá'u'lláh was convinced of the efficacy as well as of the substance of his reforms, prosecuted under favorable circumstances.

In this section, an attempt has been made to present some of the reforms Bahá'u'lláh proposed for global reform. Significant as these teachings are within the Bahá'í worldview, they represent only a few of Bahá'u'lláh’s acts of legislation, which, perforce, ranged from matters of personal piety to international relations. Sustained throughout his legislative activity was the reiteration of spiritual authority, expressed in the very eschatological terms with which *The Book of Certitude* was concerned. The authority of the World Reformer, as articulated in *The Book of Certitude*, remained an expressive constant throughout Bahá'u'lláh’s subsequent legislative ministry.

A Synopsis of Bahá'í Reformist Vision

In the interests of methodological control, this article has, for the most part, restricted its use of Bahá'í interpretive texts in an effort to present the writings of Bahá'u'lláh as the primary source for Bahá'í thought. Cole characterizes Bahá'u'lláh’s thought as representing a “precocious advocacy of democracy” bound up with his “millenarian ideas” (Cole, “Iranian Millenarianism” 3). The ideological trajectory of Bahá'u'lláh’s reformist vision was developed further and systematized through the official interpretive writings of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and received further elaboration through enactments and policy statements by the Universal House of Justice. To give the reader a fair impression of how Bahá'u'lláh’s various laws and injunctions have been crystallized into a definitive vision of a new world order, which Bahá'ís in their own way endeavor to promote, the following passage from Shoghi Effendi is perhaps the most well known and representative:

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the

nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving. (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203–4)

Bahá'u'lláh was doubtless the inspiration for this vision of a future golden age. Most, if not all, of the ideas touching on international relations in the passage above are traceable to Bahá'u'lláh. Were this point to be challenged, it would prove an interesting verificatory exercise. In any event, we can definitely say that Shoghi Effendi's interpretations draw out many of the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and, in the final analysis, are authoritative for Bahá'ís. This fact is significant, in that it commits the Bahá'í Faith to the pursuit of these infrastructures of a new world order.

Conclusion

In this article, *The Book of Certitude* has been contextualized in three dimensions: (1) historically, within Bábí and Bahá'í history; (2) intellectually, within the rich and multiform Islamic heritage of figurative and symbolic exegesis of the Qur'án; and (3) ideologically, within a reformist context in modern Islam. Though text-centered, this article has not been ideologically reductionist in addressing context. Questions of genetic influence have been left open ended.

The study of *The Book of Certitude* is fundamental to an understanding of the rise of the Bahá'í Faith. An introduction of this significant text to scholarship was the immediate academic need this study tried to fulfill. As *The Book of Certitude* is used very often in the Bahá'í conversion process, the work continues to produce meaning from the Qur'án as well as the New Testament. And from its exegetical techniques and argumentation, meaning is produced by Bahá'ís from non-Islamic and even non-Western scriptures in the missionary process. Since the Qur'án, as a scriptural authority, is alien to the non-Islamic and so-called primitive forms of spirituality from which the majority of Bahá'í converts the world over have recently come, the exegetical principles in *The Book of Certitude* are now adapted and universalized in non-Islamic contexts.

Islamic thought, of course, informs *The Book of Certitude* and suffuses it. Yet its ideological departures from Islamic orthodoxy are decisive and irreversible. The text's discontinuities with Islam probably explain more about what is intrinsic to the Bahá'í Faith than do the ideological carryovers.

As an exegete, Bahá'u'lláh clearly demonstrates the acquisitive nature of the Islamic exegetical tradition. Of the distinct exegetical techniques employed, *The Book of Certitude* was found to have drawn most heavily on, analogy, on recourse to Imámí anecdotal wisdom tradition, and on the use of interscriptural exegesis. Use of the first two techniques may be an indicator as to procedural devices relied on most in allegorical exegesis of the Qur'án. Bahá'u'lláh uses such devices to produce new meaning, moving text from traditionally received interpretations to an original and "realized" meaning.

Stylistically, Bahá'u'lláh frequently employs genitive metaphors in the course of his writing. In the exordium of *The Book of Certitude*, the epitome of salvation history is presented with abundant use of metaphor, before overt exegesis even begins. Bahá'u'lláh sustains and reinforces his symbolic exegeses through stylistic recourse to the very same kind of “metaphorical” genitive (*idáfa-yi isti 'ári*).

There has also been the question as to Bahá'u'lláh's own sense of mission and its stages of development. On this depends much of the reading of *The Book of Certitude*, its authorial tenor and audience reception, why it emerged as the most important doctrinal text of the Bahá'í Faith, when it was, in point of fact, originally a Bábí apology.

Associative meanings are important to bring out in this kind of study, for the text had an impact on the convert beyond considerations of prophetic veracity. Once faith is vested in God through Bahá'u'lláh as mediator, the convert accepts Bahá'u'lláh's authority, to enact religious legislation, structured within a realized eschatological worldview.

The Book of Certitude was first read as an evidential treatise on the Islamic *eschaton*, traditional assumptions that the Báb had challenged. The Báb's claim to Mahdihood was difficult for his uncle to accept, and we can appreciate why he approached Bahá'u'lláh with his questions. The Báb's uncle was (to quote the late Lawrence Durrell out of context) one of “the devout, saddled with doubt.” Originally an apology for the Báb, *The Book of Certitude* underwent certain associative transformations. Following the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bábí eschatology of *The Book of Certitude* itself became “realized” in the person of Bahá'u'lláh. Among other messianic dignities, Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be the “return” of the Báb, and on this ground alone did *The Book of Certitude* suddenly transform into a reflexive vindication of Bahá'u'lláh. Hence, the text then took on a dual purpose: first, vindication of the Báb, and later, the legitimation of Bahá'u'lláh whom, at any rate in Bahá'í perspective, the Báb had foretold.

In time, the realized *eschaton* became a reformist agenda. To a limited extent, this program may be seen within the context of Islamic reform. Indeed, some facets of Bahá'u'lláh's vision do share elements of thought with Persian secularists and Islamic modernists alike. However, the reforms Bahá'u'lláh pursued were much broader in scope. His sense of mission professedly extended to global reform. The very universality inherent in such an enterprise already transcends the bounds of Islam.

Good exegetes are typically quite brilliant. These custodians of the Book had the power, probably more than any other class of people apart from autocrats, to advance or retard religious adaptation and social progress. It takes a certain measure of genius to produce meaning from a text against the weight of orthodoxy. At the very least, Bahá'u'lláh was such an exegete.

Whether or not *The Book of Certitude* ought to be read in light of messianic secrecy, as a document of covert ideological circumlocution in the prelegislative stage of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry, soon the Qur'án would be invoked as a proof-text for Bahá'u'lláh's post-declaration authority. His bold new exegesis of the Qur'án, as presented in the text under study, served as a bridge to the recognition of a new Revelation, eclipsing both Qur'án and Islam in the course of Bahá'í history.

Notes

1. On Bahá'u'lláh's post-declaration authority claims, see the present writer's synopsis, “A Unique Eschatological Interface: Bahá'u'lláh and Cross-Cultural Messianism.”
2. The present article is a revised chapter of the author's master's thesis, “Symbolic Quranic Exegesis in Bahá'u'lláh's *Book of Certitude*: The Exegetical Creation of the Bahá'í Faith” (University of Calgary, 1991), forthcoming as *Symbol and Secret: Qur'án Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Certitude*, Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions Series, vol. 7, with a different concluding chapter. My thesis supervisor was Islamicist Andrew Rippin.
3. *Tafsír*, that is, Qur'án commentary. The most accessible discussion of this literature is that of A. Rippin, s.v. “Tafsír” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* 14: 37–47. Oxford University has recently published a proceedings volume from the important 1985 conference on the topic at the University of Calgary: *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'án*.
4. Cole was the first to have applied Wrede's concept of Jesus' “Messianic Secret” to Bahá'u'lláh. See Cole, s.v. “Bahá-Alláh,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 424. For further information on Bahá'u'lláh's messianic secret, the most

- extensive and well-researched treatment to date is Cole's "Bahá'u'lláh's Surah of the Companions"; see also the final chapter in Buck, *Symbol and Secret* (see note 2 above). On the subsequent development of Bahá'u'lláh's authority claims, see Lambden, "Some Notes."
5. Two years after the revelation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, there arose a need to address the question of Persian reform. In 1875, 'Abdu'l-Bahá composed the Treatise on Civilization [*Risála-yi Madaniyyat*], known today as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. The circumstances surrounding the writing of the treatise on civilization are given by Bahá'u'lláh as quoted in Muhammad 'Alí Fayzí, *Hayat-i Hazrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 42. By coincidence of publication at least, and probably by design when Bahá'u'lláh's imprimatur is taken into account, *The Book of Certitude* is linked with this treatise on reform. As to specific reforms spelled out in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Momen ("The Bahá'í Influence" 53) identifies ten:
 - 1) Extension of education throughout the country;
 - 2) Systematization of court procedure and in particular a definite limit to the appeal procedure for litigation;
 - 3) Development of useful arts and sciences;
 - 4) Promotion of industry and technology;
 - 5) Extension of foreign relations and expansion of trade;
 - 6) Guarantee of individual rights such as security of property and equality before the law;
 - 7) Restriction of the absolute authority of provincial governors and review of their sentences by the Shah and higher courts in the capital;
 - 8) Elimination of bribery and corruption;
 - 9) Reform of the army with proper provisions, armaments, and training;
 - 10) The setting up of councils and assemblies of consultation.
 6. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century" 1. My thanks to Dr. Cole for providing me an advance copy of this important study, with permission to cite from it.
 7. The most authoritative English-language account of which remains Serif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*.
 8. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet to Áqá Mírzá Asad'u'lláh Núrí, unpublished, uncatalogued manuscript. See Lambden, "A Tablet of Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Bahá'u'lláh" 55 n. 3.
 9. An irresistible implication, suggested by Rippin, personal communication, 5 December 1990.
 10. *Taqiyya* is religious dissimulation under threat of persecution. Amanat, "Review of *Mysticism and Dissent*" 470.
 11. On this, Bayat remarks that Bahá'u'lláh's acceptance of the legitimacy of secular authority "embraced what no Muslim sect, no Muslim school of thought ever succeeded in or dared to try: the doctrinal acceptance of the de facto secularization of politics which had occurred in the Muslim world centuries earlier" (*Mysticism and Dissent* 130).
 12. E., G. Browne, who had visited Afghání at Prince Malkum Khán's home in England in the autumn of 1891, writes of Afghání's encyclopaedia entry (to which Bahá'u'lláh refers in the quotation above): "We talked a good deal about the Bábís, as to whom he was very well informed (he wrote an excellent, but unsympathetic account of them in Butrus al-Bustání's Arabic Encyclopaedia, the *Dá'iratu'l-Ma'arif*), though he had no great opinion of them" (Browne, *The Persian Revolution* 45).
 13. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism" 23, n. 9, citing 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Majmú'iah-i mubárahah* 89–90, with a supporting witness in Thompson, *Diary* 100–103.
 14. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism" 3. Cole states that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was convinced that Bahá'u'lláh had prophesied the revolution and constitution (3 and 23, n. 9).
 15. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 415. Another Persian reformer Shaykh Ahmad Rúhí was also a son-in-law of Azal.

16. Quoted in Browne, “The Bábís of Persia” 946; reprinted in Browne, *Selections* 252. Shoghi Effendi translates: “This, although We have never gloried in any thing, nor did We seek preference over any soul. To everyone We have been a most kindly companion, a most forbearing and affectionate friend. In the company of the poor We have sought their fellowship, and amidst the exalted and learned We have been submissive and resigned” (The *Book of Certitude* 249–50).
17. Translated by MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha’ism” 225, where he perceptively observes: “We are, quite clearly, moving very far away from the hopes and methods of early Babism. And, indeed, it is obvious that Husayn ‘Alí [Bahá’u’lláh] went beyond even the tradition of Shí‘í quietism in arguing, not that secular rulers, though usurpers of true authority, had to be tolerated, but that God Himself had given the government of the earth into their hands.”
18. See Momen’s remarks in his foreword to Afnan, *Black Pearls* ix-xvii.
19. Elsewhere, MacEoin indulges in totally unsupported speculation in attempting to explain the genesis of Bahá’u’lláh’s messianic consciousness. Referring to Bahá’u’lláh’s first visions (said to have first taken place in Kurdistán rather than in the Síyáh-Chál in 1852!), MacEoin states: “Visions of this heavenly maiden seem to have been linked in Bahá’ Alláh’s mind with a growing sense of personal distress and feelings of disquiet about the conduct and future of the Bábí community. In 1859, he was aged forty, and it is arguable that, in common with other religious personalities throughout history, he underwent a life crisis whose perplexities became inextricably interwoven with external difficulties. Out of this emerged a sense of personal mission that came to be interpreted increasingly in terms of the appearance of a new revelation; but public expression of such themes seems to have occurred very late” (“Divisions and Authority Claims” 125). The visions were decisive, to be sure; but the whole notion of a mid-life crisis in 1859 is not tied to any event whatsoever. Moreover, MacEoin expects us to believe that the Sufi poet al-Fárid served as Bahá’u’lláh’s “principal source of inspiration” for the idea of a heavenly maiden and that for some time after his return from exile, he “remained under Súfí influence.”
20. Synopsis and Codification 24–25. MacEoin judges this passage as reflecting “a very strong anti-liberalism.” This may not be the only possible interpretation, however, unless MacEoin wishes to extend his conception of liberalism to anarchy. Law and order is often defined in terms of the trade-off between personal freedoms and the common weal. MacEoin’s characterization of the Bahá’í system as “epistemological authoritarianism” ignores the democratic and representative consultative and legislative structures of the Bahá’í framework of elected councils (“Bahá’í Fundamentalism” 63).
21. A reference to the 57th Súrih of the Báb’s *Qayyúm-i-Asmá*: “God, verily, created around this Gate (*al-báb*) oceans of celestial water, tinged crimson with the oil of existence and vitalised through the animating power of the desired fruit. For it God decreed arks of ruby, tender [or: refreshingly cool], crimson-coloured, wherein none shall ride save the people of Bahá’ (Quoted in Lambden, “Mysteries” 60).
22. See F. Froughi and S. Lambden, “A Tablet” 28–49.

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