

Relativism Reconsidered in Bahá'í Scriptures

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Summary: *This paper examines the relativist theory that has framed intellectual discourse for ~200 years. While finding some support for relativist ideas in certain contexts, the article takes a more critical view of these theories in light of the Bahá'í writings. It further explores how the more mystical texts in the Bahá'í Faith may enlighten this discussion, the broader context of religious revelation across faith traditions, and potential applications related to the life of society. While the paper offers a secular and historical context, the writings of leading figures of the Bahá'í Faith – Bahá'u'lláh as Prophet-Founder, His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Faith's Guardian, Shoghi Effendi – are primary references.*

Growing up with what I would describe as more traditional religious values, I've always been inherently troubled by the trends toward relativism. My unease is not just on an intellectual level, but I have a very deep seated feeling – call it women's intuition perhaps – that accepting a philosophy of 'anything goes' hinders spiritual and moral development at individual levels and portends wider ethical problems at societal levels. While relativist ideas have existed for centuries, there has been a steadily growing intellectual movement to advance them over the last couple of hundred years, especially in the social sciences. While this subject has been bandied about for decades in the halls of academia, it also influences our day-to-day lives – and our belief systems – in ways that we may not recognize if we do not engage in critical reflection about this important topic. In this paper, I would like to present a perspective that is more spiritual in nature and based on some insights that I have gleaned from the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith.

But, firstly, what is relativism? *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes that “Relativism, roughly put, is the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them.” Academic speak aside, a simpler version of this definition is that values – like truth, goodness, and beauty for example – are context specific and have no universal validity. The academic community will belabor different definitions of relativism (ethical relativism, cognitive relativism, epistemic relativism, etc...), but because this article is not an academic paper per se, I have elected to use just one broader definition that will be understood by wider audiences.

While some Bahá'í scholars have shared views on the subject of relativism, this article explores some wider nuances on this subject in the Bahá'í writings than I have seen expressed to date, and approaches it from a multi-faith lens. My own upbringing in the Bahá'í Faith centered around the scriptural core of the Bahá'í writings. While a largely secular agenda has seemingly, and very regrettably in my view, replaced this focus over the past several decades, these writings are extensive, profound, and offer insights that are worth further consideration – by both Bahá'ís themselves and/or other spiritual seekers. A religion cannot truly be known, applied, advanced, or sustained, in my view, without a deep dive into its core scriptures. At a minimum, I hope this article impels such further study, both among Bahá'ís themselves and by those interested in the philosophy of religion.

¹The views expressed in this paper are the author's and do not represent institutional Bahá'í positions. It is published online to allow more independence of thought, and a first person narrative, than is currently accepted in printed Bahá'í journals. Several other Bahá'í scholars/academics reviewed drafts of this paper and it has been in development for ~1.5 years.

My overall claim is that, while relativist ideas have some support in different contexts in the Bahá'í scriptures, it warrants far more critical examination in others. Adopting a relativist framework without any caveats, I will argue, misses the main point of religious revelation, the oneness of humanity themes that the Bahá'í Faith advances, and also fails to address the multiple layers of spiritual reality that are delineated in Bahá'í texts. Additionally, the Bahá'í scriptures – like most religions – establish the critical importance of an ethical and moral foundation in the life of society vs. the “anything goes” or the shifting sands of relativist thought. My primary references for this article are the writings of leading figures of the Bahá'í Faith – Bahá'u'lláh as Prophet-Founder, His son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the Faith’s Guardian, Shoghi Effendi. (For more insights on these individuals and the Faith’s history, please see: <https://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahauallah-covenant>).²

To benefit the reader, this article commences with a brief review of relativism as an increasingly popular secular theory grounded, among others, in modernist and postmodernist thought. It then turns to a more mystical/spiritual analysis that presents itself in the Bahá'í writings related to relativism vis-a-vis God, the Manifestations of God, and our own human realm. Finally, well-known statements made about the relativity of religious truth in the Bahá'í writings are addressed, with final thoughts offered about potential consequences of applying relativist frameworks to the life of society.

The Rise of Relativist Frameworks

Although it cannot be treated here in-depth, a summary of modernist and post-modernist thought provides some necessary context for how relativist theory has gained traction. The modernist movement – impacting art, literature, culture, and philosophy – commenced in the late 19th century and broke from traditional ways of knowing and sought new forms of expression in an era of rapid industrialization and social change. It advanced a more individualistic, materialistic, and objective view of reality that was divorced from pre-modern (or more mythological and metaphysical) ways of understanding the world. Among others, it led to an alienation from prevailing morality and conventions. Some key thinkers included Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, and Jean-Paul Sartre.³

Postmodernism, a movement that appeared in the latter half of the 20th century, was largely skeptical in tone and centered on relativism, e.g. that there were no universal truths, no objective reality, no meta-narratives (larger stories about civilizational development), and no understandings about the world that were not socially determined. Meanings were largely derived from one’s own environment, community, and moral values. This ideology has devoted significant attention to the links between knowledge, language, and power, as well as the alleged dominance and discourses of elite groups as contrasted with oppressed peoples. It is, in part, based on emphasizing divisions in society, which are accepted as inevitable and immutable. Some key thinkers included Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. It is important to add that the majority of these thinkers, in both

²Whereas the rather odd trend over the past several decades in some Bahá'í institutions and programs of study has, seemingly, been a focus on advancing the writings of secular thinkers, the religion has thousands of core scriptures that deserve far more attention than they are receiving in my view, both in and outside of the Bahá'í community.

³Ideologies centered around class prejudices as the basis of all relationships, largely promoted in the writings of Karl Marx and later by Paolo Freire, are also very prominent today in many types of organizations (including in educational and religious institutions), but the divisions they espouse and their outcomes are rarely critically questioned. See the author’s posts on this topic at: <https://bahaiteachings.org/what-is-spiritual-oppression/> and <https://bahaiteachings.org/considering-class-prejudice-and-abolishing-it/>

the modern and postmodern period, did not believe in God and, in some cases, actively opposed any religious frameworks.⁴

As such, these movements were materialistic in their approach in that man and the physical world were put at the center of reality. While both modernist and postmodernist thinking invited more openness to cultural pluralism and different forms of expression (which will be addressed later in this article), they both largely rejected tradition and divine authority and claimed that humans could only know what was in their heads and in the physical world vs. having any access to truth, spiritual reality, and/or transcendental knowledge.

Bahá'í scholar Wolfgang Klebel has provided additional comments on the rise of relativist thinking: “views of the human inability to know truth were presented in many philosophical systems; most of them are rather widespread today. The following theories can be counted among these views: in ancient times pre-Socratic sophism, today modern agnosticism, relativism and post modernism, and in some ways nominalism and conceptionalism, all of which deny the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood, good from bad, light from darkness, and guidance from error” (Klebel, 126).⁵

In another paper titled “Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings,” scholar Ian Kluge further surveys some of the main tenets of relativist frameworks. “By various paths,” he wrote, “they all come to agree that there are no facts, only individual or collective viewpoints, or ‘solidarities,’ that no single all-inclusive perspective exists, that all these viewpoints are equal and none ‘privileged’ above any other, and that there is no universal or Archimedean standpoint from which to judge among competing viewpoints. The influence of [this] postmodern philosophy reaches throughout virtually all branches and levels of academia” (Kluge, 182).⁶

So where are we today where these theories are concerned? In a relativist framework, very broadly defined, conceptions of truth do not exist, but can only be relative, e.g. there cannot be any ‘truth(s)’ given that personally held opinions are as varied as the persons holding them. Views may run the gamut from those believing there is a ‘truth’ out there that we cannot understand to there is no ‘truth’ outside of one’s own personal social constructs. In its more extreme forms, relativists might argue, that, if all understandings are socially constructed, there can be no foundational knowledge, no certain claims, or, alternatively, that all such claims are equally valid.

While some scholars suggest that these theories just represent a narrow, academic debate of little consequence in the halls of higher education, others believe they are much more pervasive. Dr. Christopher Norris, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Wales, has critiqued these theories at length in several books and posits that they have substantially influenced, among others, the spheres of

⁴ AI was used to research and summarize these movements (ithy.com), as well as reference to *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This is the only instance in which AI was used in preparing this paper.

⁵Nominalism and conceptionalism are theories advanced by 17th and 18th century philosophers of the Enlightenment period such as René Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume. In brief, these theories claimed that there are no universals or abstract concepts, but the only reality is how the mind of man perceives things. “I think therefore I am,” Descartes famously wrote.

⁶The term Archimedean comes from Archimedes, an ancient Greek polymath, and references a God’s eye viewpoint from which objective truths can be perceived and from which reason commences. Views about there being such an Archimedean point are very much out of fashion today. The assertion that there is any truth, and especially one built on a moral foundation advanced by religion, is widely debunked in our modern world, if not now approached with outright hostility.

ethics and politics.⁷ It can be argued that this mindset has infiltrated society in ways that most probably don't even recognize or question, although more are now starting to do so.

In a recent paper, for example, Professor of Sociology Bernhard Lahire at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon claims that relativism has “a broad dominance in the social sciences.” Among others, it ends up “denying the existence of an objective social reality, rejecting the idea that there is a reality that exists independently of any observation, description, or interpretation of it.” And while these frameworks have drawn attention to differing, culturally specific views on the world, they have also resulted, says Lahire, in a “disorderly multiplicity of points of view” that rules out both the possibility of passing judgement on knowledge produced or on integrating different perspectives.

Besides focusing on multiplicity over unity, another important point about relativist theory is the lack of support for meta-narratives. Namely, larger stories about humanity's evolution. Meta-narratives, however, are central to Bahá'í philosophy, particularly as they relate to the historical development of higher levels of unity at the level of the tribe, city state, nation, and world. Although we may see troubling reversals today on the unity front, a question that Kluge rightly poses remains: “How could the human race be unified if all peoples did not have something in common, if there were no objectively real, foundational and universal capacity for rational thinking and decision making, [and] for actualizing ‘spiritual susceptibilities?’” (Kluge, 206).

Unity, or even consensus, is hard to achieve when there is little, if any, agreement beyond a multitude of individual opinions. Besides the implications related to cooperation in society, or the lack thereof, the advocates of a relativist worldview often claim that this life – limited by our own physical reality and thinking – is the only existence and that, additionally, any higher order truths cannot really be known or established. The scriptures of nearly every major religion, however, tell a very different story.

Like most religions, the Bahá'í writings comment extensively on the knowledge of God or a Supreme Being, the connections between the spiritual and physical worlds, the mysteries of creation, and the development and immortality of the soul.⁸ This human, or temporal realm, its writings assert, is just one stop on the eternal spiritual journey of our souls. Prolific writings not only present the phases of this journey, but imply a spiritual development throughout multiple worlds of God. And plenty of advice is offered too on how to live our best lives in this world.

The prophet founders of the world's major religions – from Zoroaster to Buddha to Moses to Jesus to Muhammad to Bahá'u'lláh – have advanced universal laws, metaphysical themes, spiritual principles, and directives that have provided guidance for both individuals and society at large over the millennia. Although a comparative religious analysis is, admittedly, beyond this article's scope, it remains that most faith communities, including Bahá'í adherents, accept that their founders have some divine authority and have established a set of foundational spiritual truths to guide humanity in this world. Even when ignored, abused, or corrupted, the scriptures of, for example, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith all repeatedly call its adherents to follow a path of righteousness and selfless deeds.

⁷In addition to the work cited in the appendix, see also: “Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction, and Critical Theory” by Christopher Norris.

⁸ I put these points under a framework of ‘divine philosophy,’ which is mentioned by both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in their writings; similar themes appear across many other wisdom and faith traditions.

Someone adhering to a firm relativist position, in contrast, would say that there are no such universal standards. But, what is humanity left with if that is really the case? For individuals, I would argue that the relativist frameworks that humanity has been living under for an extended period has not only separated us from any divine or spiritual endowment but also removed any central point around which to orient the meaning and purpose of our lives. In pre-modern times, religion largely played that role. Abuses of religion throughout history aside, and the disdain leveled against religion by most modernist and postmodernist thinkers, it still offers a guidepost for both individual behavior and societal cohesion. As Bahá'u'lláh reiterates:

In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine. Unto this will bear witness every man of true understanding.⁹

It is probably clear to most fair observers that the life of humanity today is characterized by significant chaos and confusion. Additionally, with limited guideposts, or ethical rudders, it is facing a profound anomie and nihilism. As Bahá'u'lláh poignantly reiterates in the Lawh-i-Hikmat (*The Tablet of Wisdom*):

We exhort mankind in these days when the countenance of Justice is soiled with dust, when the flames of unbelief are burning high and the robe of wisdom rent asunder, when tranquility and faithfulness have ebbed away and trials and tribulations have waxed severe, when covenants are broken and ties are severed, when no man knoweth how to discern light and darkness or to distinguish guidance from error. O peoples of the world! Forsake all evil, hold fast that which is good. Strive to be shining examples unto all mankind, and true reminders of the virtues of God amidst men.

Exploring Mystical Meanings in the Bahá'í Writings

Further light can perhaps be shed on this topic when examining it through a more mystical lens. Namely, that relativity may have different meanings when looked at in the context of material vs. spiritual realities. Relativism, it seems from my own study of Bahá'í scriptures, is very different in God's realm vs. the realm of the Prophets of God vs. the human realm. For example, in both Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings, there is significant support for how we as humans can grow spiritually and reflect the light(s) of God, which is, in essence, the real purpose of our creation.¹⁰ It is also made clear, however, that we can never rise to God's level, or that of the Holy Manifestations that He sends to humanity. As Baha'u'llah's clarifies in the Kitab-i-Iqan (the Book of Certitude):

No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence; inasmuch as by a word of His command all that are in heaven and on earth have come to exist, and by His wish, which is the Primal Will itself, all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being, the world of the visible.

⁹The Bahá'í quotes used in this article are largely from the Bahá'í Reference Library (<https://www.bahai.org/library/>). See also 'Works Cited' at the end of this paper.

¹⁰'Abdu'l-Bahá, meaning Servant of Glory, was Bahá'u'lláh's appointed successor and given interpretive authority.

In another passage in *Gleanings*, He says:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or to even hint at the nature of Thine Essence. For whatever such strivings may accomplish, they can never hope to transcend the limitations imposed upon Thy creatures ...

The Divine Reality is far removed from man,” adds ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It is “*abstract, limitless, impersonal beyond human comprehension.*” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further clarifies that “*the Word of God is collective wisdom, absolute knowledge and eternal truth.*” The ‘*eye of God*’ is yet another expression that is used nearly 200 times in Bahá’u’lláh’s core writings and nearly 100 times in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s, which is defined, among others, as ‘*the horizon of divine knowledge,*’ and ‘*the all perceiving.*’ God is often referred to as “*an unknowable Essence*” in Bahá’í scriptures. In another passage, Bahá’u’llah clarifies that God is beyond all human attributes such as ascent and descent and that no human heart can comprehend “*His fathomless mystery.*”¹¹

But, what do these statements have to do with relativism? In *The Seven Valleys* – one of Bahá’u’llah’s most mystical works – He mentions relative existence when explaining four divine states: the First, the Last, the Seen, and the Hidden. God, He implies, inhabits all these realms and these concepts also exist in the earthly realm. Giving concrete examples, He tells an audience of Sufi mystics how a man may be first in relation to his son, last in relation to his father, has an outward appearance and an inner divine trust. These, seemingly, are relative positions in this earthly plane. He adds, in that regard, that:

These statements are made in the sphere of that which is relative. Otherwise, those souls who with but one step have traversed the world of the relative and the conditioned, and dwelt in the court of independent sovereignty, and pitched their tent in the realms of absolute authority and command, have burned away these relativities with a single spark, and blotted out these words with a mere dewdrop. And they swim in the sea of the spirit, and soar in the holy atmosphere of light.

Relativism, in this context then, implies a condition that is limited and earthbound. The concept of the absolute, in contrast, appears to be associated with a higher, spiritual reality. As the above quote implies, these latter stations are perhaps attainable only by very pure, holy, and detached souls. The *Seven Valleys*, as an example, provides some details on the different stages of the spiritual journey needed to advance spiritually and purify one’s soul. There are several passages indicating too that, while we cannot reach God’s level, we can still experience transformation in our own sphere, or on the plane(s) we inhabit. Bahá’u’llah, in *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, states, for example, that each created thing, including in ‘*the unseen world and the world of creation,*’ needs to be understood in its own place. He adds:

¹¹There are multiple passages in the Bahá’í Writings on this theme, but only a few references are cited here for brevity. In his paper “Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics” (1988), Moojan Momen classifies Eastern faiths as monist and Western faiths as dualist and proposed a relativist approach as a unifying framework – citing Bahá’í scriptures to support both positions. The Bahá’í writings, in my view, do elaborate on how each one of us can reflect the light of God, but do not support the position that we can become God. Many of the Bahá’í writings make clear this is not the case, representing a major departure from Baha’u’llah’s early mystical writings and the Sufi traditions that were prominent at the time of His revelation. The ultimate end of the spiritual journey for Bahá’ís is the recognition of God’s Manifestation vs. direct union with God. In either case, Momen’s paper looked at relativism only in a very specific context. This paper (‘Relativism Reconsidered’) was written, in part, to present a more complex analysis.

Wert thou to witness any transformation in the realm of the divine unity, no greater sin could be conceived in all creation, but wert thou to consider transformation in its own place and understand it accordingly, no harm could befall thee.

On our own earthly plane, the Bahá'í writings elaborate that, while our own knowledge has clear limitations (addressed later in this paper), we can still reach – or at least aspire to – different spiritual stations or grades. We are warned, however, that our spiritual lives can progress, but also regress, especially when our lower nature, and ego, controls our higher nature.

For man standeth on the demarcation line between light and darkness, adds 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In the circle of existence, he is situated at the lowest point, which marketh at once the end of the arc of descent and the beginning of the arc of ascent. For this reason, he is free to move in either direction: towards light or darkness, towards ignorance or guidance—depending on the one that prevaieth.

Themes of going down the path of light or darkness – in a spiritual sense – are reiterated in all of the world's wisdom and faith literature. Furthermore, this message has not changed for millennia and it remains consistent in the Bahá'í writings. *The Hidden Words and the Seven Valleys*, for example, are among Bahá'u'lláh's most mystical and foundational texts that were revealed early in His ministry. Key themes of these works include the eternal covenant between God and man and the many ways we can either help or harm the development of our souls for further journeys beyond this “first life.”

In *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh notes that some wayfarers may only see a place of appearance and diverse colored glass, which has led to conflict and a darksome dust settling on the world. Others may gaze on the effulgence of the light, and still others ...

...have drunk of the wine of oneness and see naught but the sun itself. As the wayfarers traverse these three differing planes, their understanding and their words differ accordingly, and hence the sign of conflict hath ever appeared on earth. For there are some who dwell on the plane of Divine Unity and speak of that world, and some inhabit the realms of limitation, and some the grades of self, while others are completely veiled.

These passages make a distinction between those whose perception is material and earthbound – a place of limitation and the relative – with those whose insights have been spiritually awakened and illumined. In an empowering approach, we are called to abandon our partial and relative understandings in the human realm and to embrace a higher, more holistic, spiritual reality as revealed and explained through God's Divine Educators (see below). This journey is the objective of many spiritual seekers throughout history and is referenced in numerous faith-based scriptures. The primary duty of the spiritual seeker, therefore, is to become intimately familiar with these scriptures and to independently investigate truth for themselves, which is also a primary principle in the Bahá'í Faith.

The Role(s) of God's Manifestations

The Bahá'í writings indicate that the knowledge held by God, the knowledge held by His Divine Manifestations, and the knowledge held by us (as more fallible mortals) all represent different layers of knowing and reality. As Bahá'u'lláh says in *Gleanings*:

And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being He hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself.

Per the nuance of the Bahá'í writings, there are multiple passages noting that these Manifestations of God are both separate from God and, in other contexts, speak on God's behalf. Much of the Kitáb-i-Iqán (The Book of Certitude) expounds on these diverse stations. *"Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at God's forbidding voice, 'Thou shalt never behold Me!'*", says Bahá'u'lláh.

The term 'divine unity' is also mentioned over 500 times in the core literature of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh uses this term in several different ways, including as the sovereignty of God over the world of being, the oneness of God, the higher station of God's Prophets, and the essential purposes of the Word of God. As Bahá'u'lláh reiterates again in *Gleanings*:

He is a true believer in Divine unity who, far from confusing duality with oneness, refuseth to allow any notion of multiplicity to becloud his conception of the singleness of God, who will regard the Divine Being as One Who, by His very nature, transcendeth the limitations of numbers. The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same.

The Bahá'í writings imply that, even though we may only have relative vs. absolute knowledge (at least in this plane of existence), God's Manifestations are not so constrained and have access to higher levels of Truth.¹² Through receiving divine revelation, they exist on a different level of reality and, through that lens, offer humanity guidance for, among others, exploring the true purpose of our lives and our calling and service in this world.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit (also mentioned over 600 times in the Bahá'í writings), God's prophets can also help us to access higher perceptions of reality, and spiritual truths, if we so choose. *"Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths,"* counsels Bahá'u'lláh. In the same text, *Gleanings*, there are other, hopeful passages explaining the spiritual levels that we can reach:

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. Endowed with a new eye, ear, heart and mind, the passage continues, he (the seeker) "will contemplate the manifest signs of the universe, and will penetrate the hidden mysteries of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to

¹²The word 'Truth' is often capitalized in both the Bahá'í writings and other faith-based scriptures.

the stations of absolute certitude. He will discover in all things the mysteries of Divine Revelation, and the evidences of an everlasting Manifestation.

It's questionable how many of us may actually reach these more sublime spiritual levels, which, perhaps, may be compared to reaching 'Enlightenment' in traditions such as Buddhism. Inevitably, a lot of detachment is required. It remains that the higher stations, and celestial knowledge, of the Manifestations of God are common themes across many faith traditions. Such Manifestations would include, among others, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh.

Most faith adherents believe that these Manifestations of God, particularly the founders of the world's great religions, have an elevated station and are vehicles for the voice of God to humanity. Such Prophets have depicted themselves, and are understood by many of their followers, as having both an earthly existence as well as a divine reality and mission. There are multiple passages in the Bahá'í writings, for example, that note how these '*stainless Souls*' are both separate from God and, in other contexts, they speak on God's behalf. As visually conveyed by the Bahá'í ringstone symbol, these '*Luminaries*' serve as mediators between man and God. They speak to humanity – in the form of the Primal Will or the Holy Spirit – and, thus, convey the God's purpose for us, and an existence beyond this more limited plane.¹³

A passage in *Gleanings* reiterates that every one of these '*sanctified beings*' is the "*Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above and the Standards of His Truth unto everyone in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.*" They can be considered translators in a sense, e.g. conveying the absolute and essential in ways that we can understand and, thus, revealing to us what is not relative and what transcends our temporal realm. In a more practical vein, Bahá'u'lláh also clarifies that they offer the remedy for the ills of mankind in every given age:

The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity. To none is given the right to question their words or disparage their conduct, for they are the only ones who can claim to have understood the patient and to have correctly diagnosed its ailments. No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained.... These are not days of prosperity and triumph. The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.

Other writings reiterate that mankind is afflicted with '*incalculable afflictions*' and has '*conceived the straight to be crooked,*' because it has, essentially, chosen to ignore consistent divine guidance in favor of errant religious leaders, ignorant or corrupt leaders, and those '*intoxicated by self-conceit.*' Alas, the trend today in many faith communities is to put greater stock in the siren voices of secular ideologues vs. these Divine Physicians. Shoghi Effendi provides further insights:

¹³The Primal Will and Holy Spirit is used here to define a divine consciousness that reveals itself to humanity through an intermediary. The Logos, Word of God, Tawhid, the First Remembrance, and Universal Intellect are similar expressions as conveyed in different traditions. This theme is prominent as well in the Bahá'í writings.

Humanity has, alas, with increasing insistence, preferred, instead of acknowledging and adoring the Spirit of God as embodied in His religion in this day, to worship those false idols, untruths and half-truths, which are obscuring its religions, corrupting its spiritual life, convulsing its political institutions, corroding its social fabric, and shattering its economic structure.

At a time when almost every authority is questioned and almost any ‘privileged’ viewpoint is labeled as biased, especially by the political Left and relativist thinkers, it is very unpopular to assert that there is any such standard of truth, or that guidance is regularly provided on any kind of superordinate level. Of course, with the free will we are given, we have the choice to accept or ignore the advice we are given, or to believe or disbelieve in God and His Messengers entirely.¹⁴

Despite these trends in modern society, there are still billions who accept the divine authority of the Prophets of God and turn to their guidance and scriptures. Bahá’ís, in turn, are also called to love God, to recognize the station of Bahá’u’lláh, to become thoroughly acquainted with His prodigious writings and laws, and to trust the validity of the spiritual medicine He offers.

Relativity and Revelation

Where confusion about relativism sometimes comes into play in the Bahá’í writings is in the context of the relativity of religious revelation, which is a prominent principle in Bahá’í texts and discourses. Progressive revelation, a related concept, is central to Bahá’í thinking and arises primarily in the writings of the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, Shoghi Effendi. Since his comments are sometimes taken out of context, full quotes are cited below:

The Revelation, of which Bahá’u’lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man’s allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.

Per above, the assertion that God will never leave His children alone and without guidance is repeated in many ways in the Bahá’í writings, as is the concept of the fundamental oneness of religion and statements that each Manifestation of God reveals truths according to the capacity of the peoples in any given age. Bahá’ís believe, for example, that Bahá’u’lláh has revealed the teachings and laws necessary to gather together the peoples of the world under the banner of the oneness of humanity, which would

¹⁴Despite the prominence of atheist positions, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center indicated that some 83% of people (over at least the 35 countries analyzed) believe in God. See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/05/06/god-spirits-and-the-natural-world/>

not have been possible at an earlier time in history. Religion then is seen as ever evolving. This concept is a powerful idea in Bahá'í philosophy, is seen as a cornerstone of Bahá'í teachings, and links with relative considerations from a different angle. However, this theme also benefits from some context and a comparison with other relevant quotes that tell a broader story.

The religion of God has two parts, clarifies 'Abdu'l-Bahá – one which is eternal and unchangeable, and the other which can be described as secondary teachings and which, therefore, are subject to modifications according to the conditions of time and place and the spiritual maturity of humanity. He repeats these ideas multiple times in several different texts and talks, especially during his travels to Europe and North America early in the 20th century.¹⁵

For example, in speaking to a gathering in Washington, DC in 1912, Abdu'l-Bahá contrasted '*laws and ordinances which are temporary*' in each religious dispensation with those that are essential. The latter are defined, among others, as having faith in God, acquiring virtues, and those '*ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics.*' Later in the same talk he added:

...the foundation of the religion of God remains permanent and unchanging. It is that fixed foundation which ensures the progress and stability of the body politic and the illumination of humanity. It has ever been the cause of love and justice amongst men. It works for the true fellowship and unification of all mankind, for it never changes and is not subject to supersedure.

In a talk in Pittsburgh in the same year, he reiterated as follows:

Each of the divine religions embodies two kinds of ordinances. The first is those which concern spiritual susceptibilities, the development of moral principles and the quickening of the conscience of man. These are essential or fundamental, one and the same in all religions, changeless and eternal—reality not subject to transformation. Abraham heralded this reality, Moses promulgated it, and Jesus Christ established it in the world of mankind. All the divine Prophets and Messengers were the instruments and channels of this same eternal, essential truth. The second kind of ordinances in the divine religions is those which relate to the material affairs of humankind. These are the material or accidental laws which are subject to change in each day of manifestation, according to exigencies of the time, conditions and differing capacities of humanity.¹⁶

Abdu'l-Bahá comments elsewhere that all religions share common spiritual virtues and divine qualities that we can aspire to and that include, among others, faith, trustworthiness, love of God, charity, purity, detachment, humility, constancy, and patience. These foundations, he says, are "*spiritual and consist in human virtues, are never subject to abrogation but are eternal and everlasting, and are renewed in every prophetic Dispensation.*"

Shoghi Effendi picked up on these dual themes – of both religion's changing and permanent aspects – in *The Promised Day is Come*:

¹⁵ For more substantial quotes on this theme, see "The Two Parts of the Law of God," by Peter Terry and which is available at Bahá'í Library Online: https://bahai-library.com/terry_parts_law_god#2

¹⁶Per Abdu'l-Bahá's comments in other texts, some examples of these temporary injunctions would include laws related to fasting, marriage, inheritance, punishment for crimes, and legal contracts.

The Faith standing identified with the name of Bahá'u'lláh disclaims any intention to belittle any of the Prophets gone before Him, to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents. Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience. His aim is to widen the basis of all revealed religion and to unravel the mysteries of their scriptures. He insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions, and on this as a basis, proclaims the possibility, and even prophecies the inevitability, of their unification, and the consummation of their highest hopes.

It seems that Shoghi Effendi's main theme in above is the continuity of religious revelation, but he also comments on elements of faith that are both 'essential and authentic' as well as the 'nonessential and spurious.' While it may be a more challenging exercise to identify what falls into each of these boxes, claiming that everything about religious revelation is relative from these singular statements does not, in my view, represent a complete picture either of Shoghi Effendi's broader writings, nor of many additional and related quotes made by Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. There are many distinctions made in a larger corpus of scriptures about what is foundational and firm vs. what is relative and changeable. To focus on the latter and neglect the former is, in my view, a grave misreading of the Bahá'í scriptures.¹⁷

The concept that everything is changing and transforming is now so engrained in modern intellectual thought (grounded in relativist theory) that the idea of what may be unchanging and permanent gets little attention or is increasingly discounted. But this latter theme is also prominent throughout the Bahá'í writings, such as Abdu'l-Bahá's comment about the laws of the natural world as follows:

...[nature] is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order and a consummate design, from which it never departs. To such an extent is this true that were you to gaze with the eye of insight and discernment, you would observe that all things—from the smallest invisible atom to the largest globes in the world of existence, such as the sun or the other great stars and luminous bodies—are most perfectly organized, be it with regard to their order, their composition, their outward form or their motion; and that all are subject to one universal law from which they never depart.

On the faith front, if every teaching about religion were relative according to changing circumstances – and there were not some elements that were foundational – then could people of faith even claim that God exists, that there are any fundamental moral values and virtues common to all religions, or that Divine Educators will continue, as promised in many faiths, to guide humanity on a path to spiritual

¹⁷ On this topic as on others, it is critical to examine the Bahá'í writings in their entirety vs. 'cherry picking' singular quotes and building a philosophy around only one favorite idea. As Shoghi Effendi himself warned nearly 90 years ago: "We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two."

growth? Furthermore, and more fundamentally for any faith adherents, if everyone has a different view of ‘truth,’ can unity at even basic levels be achieved? If the answer to these questions is ‘no,’ then it is intellectually inconsistent with many of the key points that the majority of faith-based scriptures, including the Bahá’í Faith, advance.

Relativism and the Life of Society

Despite the critiques noted, support for other relativist concepts are evident in Bahá’í scriptures. These references are primarily related to how we function and cooperate with each other in this temporal world. For example, one can legitimately argue that everyone’s different upbringing, culture, history, educational access, and life experience give them different, but valuable, worldviews to bring to the table. The honoring and appreciation of what diverse cultures and peoples offer humanity is advanced in the Bahá’í Faith under the principle of unity in diversity. Processes of respectful consultation can lead to greater levels of unity, collaboration, and collective decision-making. Bahá’ís are generally guided in these processes by a significant body of sacred scriptures to which they are encouraged to refer. This perspective would lend support to a relativist argument that an individual’s understanding of what ‘truth’ is may be very circumscribed as each person has a different background and may only hold limited pieces of truth, or perhaps just as many falsehoods.¹⁸

In their paper “Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Toward a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism,” Bahá’í authors Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg explore how seemingly antagonistic ideas of limited human knowledge vs. foundational truths can be reconciled in the consultative approach advanced in the Bahá’í teachings. Among others, they suggest, we need profound humility regarding our presumed knowledge regarding diverse aspects of reality; selfless detachment from our own paradigmatically conditioned views; and moderation in the ways we set forth our views. This is not to say, they maintain, that all lenses on specific phenomena “yield equally valid insights” or “that all truth claims are equally valid” (Smith and Karlberg, 80 and 92).

At least in the current material world we inhabit, our experience is circumscribed and our mind is finite. The points about human knowledge being relative are supported by several statements in the Bahá’í writings, such as a passage from Bahá’u’lláh in *Gleanings*:

All that the sages and mystics have said or written have never exceeded, nor can they ever hope to exceed, the limitations to which man’s finite mind hath been strictly subjected. To whatever heights the mind of the most exalted of men may soar, however great the depths which the detached and understanding heart can penetrate, such mind and heart can never transcend that which is the creature of their own conceptions and the product of their own thoughts.

While relativist worldviews then, potentially, offer value in how we relate to each other, can broaden our knowledge, improve consultation, and help us to better understand society’s spiritual evolution, I would argue that adopting this one focus alone can be quite problematic when applied at societal levels. For example, if every view is valid, as Ian Kluge posited in his paper cited earlier, then, presumably, every behavior – no matter how unsound or depraved or even criminal – becomes okay. “Relativism

¹⁸For more on the theme of the limits of human knowledge, see “Studies in Bahá’í Epistemology: Essays and Commentaries” at <https://www.bahaibookstore.com/Studies-in-Bahai-Epistemology-P10423>

undercuts the very possibility of any normative morality, in effect, reducing morals, vice and virtues, the praiseworthy and the blameworthy to a matter of personal taste and preference,” he wrote (Kluge, 223).

Some consequences, Kluge added, include no ability to construct valid ethical prescriptions, no deference to the authority and ‘privileged’ views of the Manifestations of God, and no standards by which to verify progress. With no such standpoint from which to judge the validity of various contesting truth claims, he said, then no truth claim can be proven wrong or be in error as all opinions and judgments are seen as equally valid. “Because truth claims are so hedged with conditions, there can be no certainty about anything,” he wrote. “While this may be existentially salutary in keeping us modest, in epistemology [the study of knowledge] and ethics ... it is disastrous” (Kluge, 179).

Paul Lample in his book “Revelation and Social Reality” points out too that, if there is no access to knowledge and relativism reigns, “then all that remains is the eternal struggle of one against another without any source of truth or good or right to restrain or direct power.” (Lample, 220)

Many fair-minded people would not, in fact, identity themselves as relativists when confronted with the world’s evils. Just a few examples among many are the profound injustices committed against women and children who are subject to physical and sexual abuse. Cybercriminals are stealing the savings of the elderly for their own financial gain. War criminals seem to be on the ascendancy worldwide and are destroying the peace and tranquility of millions. The list goes on. To protect innocent civilians and ensure society’s stability, perpetrators of crimes need to be held accountable to relevant institutions for the detrimental harms they cause. Many of the dedicated individuals working in the courts, in the criminal justice system, in international law, or in humanitarian fields would claim that there is nothing ‘relative’ related to allowing perpetrators of such abuses free reign.

While mercy and love and forgiveness are the ideal standards to which individuals are called in all religious scriptures, the body politic and duly-constituted institutions in society have the ‘*right to preserve and protect*,’ according to the Bahá’í writings. Again in *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu’l-Bahá lauds justice and uses the analogy of not assisting a wolf that has fallen upon a flock of sheep. The passage continues as follows:

Just as forgiveness is one of the attributes of God’s mercy, so is justice one of the attributes of His lordship. The canopy of existence rests upon the pole of justice and not of forgiveness, and the life of mankind depends on justice and not on forgiveness....Some men are like bloodthirsty wolves: If they were to see no punishment ahead, they would kill others solely for the sake of their own pleasure and diversion.

Bahá’u’lláh adds:

The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment.

As a longer term goal, the Bahá’í writings emphasize the importance of moral education as a way to prevent crime in the first place, but, until humanity reaches that advanced stage of spiritual development, the ‘anything goes’ approach of relativism remains highly problematic in a societal context.

Advancing a just and ethical society is a cornerstone of most religions, including the Bahá'í Faith. While a very longstanding philosophical debate over the millennia about the nature of good and evil cannot be addressed in any depth in this paper, it is important to bring up briefly related to relativism. Why? Because some of those adhering to relativist viewpoints would question whether there is, in fact, any difference between good and evil actions. This distinction is just a matter of perspective its adherents might claim, and is inherently subjective vs. objective.¹⁹

In contrast, there are many passages in most faith-based scriptures that counsel its adherents to turn away from evil and towards the good and these domains are both well defined and consistent. In the Bahá'í writings, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates as follows:

The purpose of religion is the acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, the betterment of morals, the spiritual development of mankind, the real life and divine bestowals. All the Prophets have been the promoters of these principles; none of Them has been the promoter of corruption, vice or evil.

In a related vein, the Bahá'í writings too are filled with statements spurning division and violence and advocating for unity and peace. Ultimately, each person has the free will to choose the former or latter path and a path of light (good) or darkness (evil). These are very common themes that are reiterated across almost all wisdom and faith-based literature. There are a few select Bahá'í passages that identify evil as the absence of good (or darkness as the absence of light), which leads to a much deeper philosophical and metaphysical debate than can be addressed here, although, in brief, it relates to God's creation being essentially good.²⁰ But, there is far more nuance to this topic in Bahá'í scriptures in my view. Among others, turning away from the self, the ego, our vain imaginings, and the evil that does become manifested in this world is identified as an integral part of our soul's journey and development.

It is worth adding that the word 'evil' comes up over 400 times in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh calls this nether world '*the abode of demons*,' which He goes on to define as those '*wayward souls who, with the burden of their evil deeds, slumber in the chambers of oblivion.*' In other passages, He adds: '*Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection*' and '*So long as one's nature yieldeth unto evil passions, crime and transgression will prevail.*' In many cases, the concept of evil is tied to our own egos and selfishness, such as the following quote from Bahá'u'lláh in *Gleanings*:

Strive not after bodily comforts, and keep your heart pure and stainless. The Evil One is lying in wait, ready to entrap you. Gird yourselves against his wicked devices, and, led by the light of the name of one true God, deliver yourselves from the darkness that surroundeth you. Center your thoughts in the Well-Beloved, rather than in your own selves.

¹⁹ Some online critics of the Bahá'í Faith have asserted that the Bahá'ís 'accept everything' and, as such, do not make these distinctions. These critiques, however, are made with little understanding of how this topic is addressed in Bahá'í scriptures.

²⁰References in this context are often made to a statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* about scorpions and snakes only being 'evil' in relation to humans, but 'good' in their own reality. Regardless of what the snake thinks and its place in God's creation, one would not, for example, put snakes in a children's playground. There are broader dimensions to this topic when considering societal applications and, as with all quotes from the Bahá'í writings, further context is needed.

In a related vein, both Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi make numerous references to dark forces operating in the world.²¹ In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Bahá also references how the Bible's Adam came from the 'kingdom of Divine Unity' and 'absolute goodness' to our temporal 'realm of bondage' and this material 'world of good and evil.' In this context, Christian readers may recall this powerful verse from the Bible (Isaiah) as follows:

*Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil;
Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness;
Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!*²²

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed relativist theory, followed by exploring relative stations at differing levels in a material vs. spiritual realm, the distinct role(s) of God and His manifestations, the essential and temporary aspects of divine revelation, and differing applications related to the life of society. While there are some common cross overs with contemporary dialogues – related, for example, to consultation, cultural diversity, and humanity's spiritual evolution – there are significant departures, in my view, between relativist theory and the core scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith.

The Bahá'í Faith – like all major religions before it – may not give each individual exactly what advice to follow in any one situation, which is left up to each person's own study and conscience and is also shaped by one's own background. Nonetheless, its very extensive scriptures still advance concrete laws, ethics, values, and universal principles that serve as guideposts, and upon which any semblance of unity must be based.

The discussion about relativism also benefits from understanding it from a more spiritual and metaphysical perspective. The Manifestations of God have a primary role, for example, in conveying to us what is eternal vs. changeable and what is one vs. multiple. The life and teachings of any faith's Prophet-Founder – inspired by Revelation – are also paramount to its ongoing vitality. These themes, and some practical applications, may best be summed up by 'Abdul-Bahá in the following:

"It is clear that human realities differ one from another, that opinions and perceptions vary, and that this divergence of thoughts, opinions, understandings, and sentiments among individuals is an essential requirement. For differences of degree in creation are among the essential requirements of existence, which is resolved into countless forms. We stand therefore in need of a universal power which can prevail over the thoughts, opinions, and sentiments of all, which can annul these divisions and bring all souls under the sway of the principle of the oneness of humanity. And it is clear and evident that the greatest power in the human world is the love of God."

²¹For a much more in-depth treatment of this topic, see also "Forces of Our Time: The Dynamics of Light and Darkness," by Hooper C. Dunbar (George Ronald Publisher, 2009).

²²Although an entire book could be written on this theme in the Bahá'í writings, a few quotes are referenced here for brevity and to touch on its links with relative thought.

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