

**"IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD": APOCALYPSE AND THE EDUCATION OF THE SOUL**

**Author:** Ross Woodman

**Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5.4 (1994): 33-57

It may be that in writing "In the Beginning Was the Word": Apocalypse and the Education of the Soul" Dr. Ross Woodman is one of the first contemporary Western Bahá'ís to plunge unabashedly into the opaque sea of Bahá'í mysticism and to attempt to use language as symbolism and metaphor to reveal some of its mysteries. This brave undertaking must have been difficult for him to put into words. No matter how gifted a writer may be, to relate a very subjective experience that envelops another world of reality, he or she is obliged to use the structure of a sensible grammar so that the reader's mind can decode what it reads into thought-pictures for the "inner eye" to see. In addition to this involuntary process taking place deep within us, the reader is also required to interpret these pictures and symbols cognitively in order to understand their inner meanings as the author intended. While this latter effort may be true for comprehending any profound written message, it is doubly true of the mystical essay, which is not meant to be a logically analyzed composition whose contents can be dissected paragraph by paragraph for its intellectual substance. Rather, it transmits a message to the reader's deeper inner self, there to be absorbed and digested, as food for the soul.

This process is much like our absorption of a beautiful piece of music, or poetic impressions, or a painting that freezes a moment of perfection or completion. Once we begin to appraise them intellectually for their "correctness" or "accuracy" by whatever standards we decide to use, their beauty flees. We experience an account of mysticism in much the same way we experience a great work of art. As a result of this different, even unusual, method of comprehension, the mystical essay requires a different set of criteria for its appreciation.

Its main element would be a process for "letting go" of the control our intellect exerts over us for most tasks we perform and allowing an inner light to be turned on. Unlike our intellect, which is an active energy, this inner light gently illuminates a mode of consciousness that allows us to experience the world of the mystic as he or she recounts it. Yet, only another mystic can know whether or not that experience is authentic, regardless of how its subject has interpreted it, for the interpretations of mystics vary. But the experience itself is described with uncommon similarity. In the introduction to *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh describes this desire and yearning for union with the Beloved as that which would "make thy soul to shake with the flashing light. . ."<sup>1</sup>

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, trans. Marzieh Gail with A.K. Khan, 3d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) 4.

Keeping all the above in mind, it is almost as difficult a task for anyone, scholar or not, to critique the contents of such an essay or to question the author's credentials in writing it. What can we say to the claim of Plotinus that he had experienced the mystical union any number of times? Or question the authenticity of the soul-shattering experiences of Alan Watts under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs? In light of all these hesitations on my part, my intention, for what it is worth, is not to criticize but only to convey my own subjective feelings and thoughts from my understanding of this remarkable essay.

But first I think mention should be made of Michael W. Sours's treatment of this same subject matter in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4.1 under the title, "The Maid of Heaven, the Image of Sophia, and the Logos: Personification of the Spirit of God in Scripture and Sacred Literature" (47-65). Sours's essay is a comprehensive and scholarly accounting and referencing of these various symbols and metaphors as they appear in Western religious literature and traditions. His intent was primarily to inform the reader of those various religious esoterica personifying Wisdom as a feminine principle (Sophia) and to compare Bahá'u'lláh's own unique application of these symbols. Sours was very thorough in his research, and no reader could fail but to come away with a wealth of information he or she did not previously possess. Woodman no doubt made use of Sours's scholarship, but I believe Woodman's motivation for writing on the same subject was somewhat different.

Woodman means to take the reader on a spiritual journey that takes place on several levels. It is a journey we first begin as infants; it is a journey symbolized by the marriage of woman and man; it is a journey humankind makes collectively; and, lastly, it is the journey the individual soul makes to attain the presence of Bahá'u'lláh by emulating his marriage to the "Maid of Heaven" or the Spirit of God. He says this "marriage" was as necessary for Bahá'u'lláh (as it was for all the Revelators of God) as it is in a lesser sense for every lover of God who would attain his or her spiritual birthright, union with Bahá'u'lláh.

Woodman points out that this union or marriage also reveals other layers of meaning. It symbolizes the commingling of the two aspects of one's own inner self, the masculine and feminine forces, which complete both the humanness and the beingness of our nature and bring them together. This inner spiritual union is also realized in the seemingly mundane institution of marriage between man and woman that unites the active and passive principles. On a universal scale, this Oneness symbolizes God's undifferentiated Word or Logos present in the beginning of the formation of the universe.

The layers of inner meanings described above form the basis of Woodman's thesis. He makes it clear that neither principle, active or passive, masculine or feminine, is superior to the other, but both are absolutely essential as equal expressions that form completeness, that is, perfection to be attained on any level, either as a cosmic realization, or by humanity as a whole, or by women

and men, and, most importantly, in the hidden world of our inmost self where the blending of those two forces into a harmonious whole takes place. Woodman tells us that the secret of wholeness and completeness hidden inside us is revealed to us by understanding the significance of the symbolism of Bahá'u'lláh's marriage to the Maid of Heaven. If we are able to understand this significance, we can understand how the Word of God makes intelligible the universal plan of God in the world of creation.

Another astonishing idea Woodman presents is a new appreciation of the apocalypse, that mystifying "event" that will characterize the "latter days" mentioned in the Book of Revelation. When we remember that the word itself means "an unveiling of things hidden," a disclosure or revelation of things not known, it suddenly becomes obvious to us that the world, and Bahá'ís in particular, stand not at the threshold, but are already within this world of hidden knowledge, "which the soul now inhabits that we must now adjust if indeed we are to survive. The education of the soul, which this essay has attempted to describe, is an education in the apocalypse. The apocalypse enacts the literal reality of the soul" (52). If indeed we are already inhabiting this inner world of revealed realities, then we must avail ourselves of these mysteries Bahá'u'lláh has already disclosed in his tablets. The world as yet is unaware of these treasures, but the aware Bahá'í cannot afford to wait within the marriage chamber, not yet ready to remove the veil.

So just as the newly born infant is guided first by the instinctive (hidden) wisdom of its mother and its education furthered by the combined knowledge of both mother and father, the infant soul in each of us is waiting to be educated in the hidden wisdom of those eternal truths lying within us from the very beginning, to be realized both within our individual selves and as a collective species consciously aware of our place in the order of things. But, for the most part, both collectively and individually we are "sleeping a strange sleep" as pertains to those realities residing deep within us.

Woodman asks us to awaken, even as Bahá'u'lláh recounts his own awakening from his sleep. He asks us to "immerse ourselves in [Bahá'u'lláh's] tablets, there to engage the 'Brides of inner meaning' now become our own newly created souls called . . . to the marriage chamber of his Word. To this engagement arising out of that immersion this essay is dedicated" (57). Certainly, one can add nothing more to his plea.

B. HOFF CONOW

---

For further readings on mysticism, see: Walter T. Stace's *The Teachings of the Mystics*, a Mentor paperback, and Jalil Mahmoudi's essay, which appeared in the 7.4 (Summer 1973) issue of *World Order Magazine*, "Irfán, Gnosis, or Mystical Knowledge."