

# Baha'i Approaches to Christianity and Islam: Further Thoughts on Developing an Inter-Religious Dialogue

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to present a novel Baha'i contribution to inter-religious dialogue, one that is based on developing intellectual bridges between the religions. It is argued that the concept of continuity of revelation is a framework by which religions can dialogue about their differences and similarities. Some preliminary aspects of this concept are outlined from scripture and current scholarship in Christianity and Islam. There are three aspects to continuity of revelation: commonalities between the religions, non-exclusivity and non-finality in relation to their claims. The paper concludes that a central theme of inter-religious dialogue should be the nature and lives of the prophet-founders. In the context of Christian – Muslim dialogue, the challenge that the prophetic career of Muhammad represents for Christians is discussed in relation to 'Abdu'l-Baha's talks in the West. Finally, the importance for Baha'is of contributing to the western discourse on Islam is explored.*

## Keywords

Baha'i  
interfaith  
interreligious  
exclusivity  
finality  
Christian-Muslim  
prophet

Since their establishment in Western Europe and North America, Baha'i communities have been active in interfaith encounters. Although the degree of this involvement has not been fully documented, evidence from community surveys indicates that it has remained one of the few consistent staples of Baha'i community life over the last few decades.<sup>1</sup> Most of these interfaith events have been local, involving prayer meetings with like-minded groups, discussions on contemporary social problems, and anti-racism marches.<sup>2</sup> Non-Baha'i media regularly report such activities, and prominent individuals, such as the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, have commented on their importance as part of the Baha'i contribution to community building.<sup>3</sup> On the national and international stage, Baha'i participation has included invitations to speak at the World Parliament of Religions and similar large conferences.

A recent contribution of the Baha'i community to inter-religious activities has been the 2002 message to the world's religious leaders from the Universal House of Justice. One notable feature of this letter is that it highlights a deficiency of 'intellectual coherence' in the interfaith movement.<sup>4</sup> Although it primarily addresses the leaders of other world religions, it has several consequences for the Baha'i community. Many will look for examples of leadership in the Baha'i community in forging new intellectual bridges between the religious communities. The message from the Universal House

1. M. McMullen, *The Bahā'ī: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 182–3.
2. R. Stockman, 'The Bahā'ī Faith and Interfaith Relations: A Brief History', *World Order*, 33:4 (2002) 19–33.
3. Tony Blair has highlighted interfaith activities in a number of Naw-Ruz greetings to the UK Baha'i community. See e.g. <http://bahai-library.com/newspapers/032199.html>.
4. The Universal House of Justice, 'To the World's Religious Leaders' (2002),

- <http://www.bahai.org/article-1-1-0-1.html>
5. The Universal House of Justice, 'The Promise of World Peace', (1985) <http://www.bahai.org/article-1-7-2-1.html>
  6. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2005).
  7. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982) 396.
  8. This builds on my previous work, 'Interreligious dialogue and the Baha'i Faith: some preliminary observations', in *Revisioning the Sacred: Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, Vol. 7 (ed. J. A. McLean, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997), [http://bahai-library.com/?file=fazel\\_interreligious\\_dialogue](http://bahai-library.com/?file=fazel_interreligious_dialogue).
  9. J. Glover, 'Dialogue is the only way to end this cycle of violence', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/comment/story/0,16141,1536885,00.html>
  10. The Universal House of Justice, 'To the World's Religious Leaders' (2002).
  11. *'Abdu'l-Bahā in London* (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982) 19.
  12. This includes Stephen Lambden's doctoral thesis, 'Some Aspects of Isrā'īliyyāt and the Emergence of the Bābī-Bahā'ī Interpretation of the Bible', University of

of Justice encourages consideration of what contributions the Baha'i community can make to the interfaith movement. In other words, beyond the assertion of the validity and unity of the world religions, what can Baha'is articulate on the central question in inter-religious encounters: how can the differences between the religions be reconciled in theory and in practice?<sup>5</sup> Without this, Baha'is believe, there will be 'harrowing consequences' arising from sectarian hatred between religious communities,<sup>6</sup> and continuing warfare between and within nations. 'Abdu'l-Baha is reported to have said that, 'Fundamentally, all warfare and bloodshed in the human world are due to the lack of unity between the religions, which through superstitions and adherence to theological dogmas have obscured the one reality which is the source and basis of them all.'<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I suggest that the central Baha'i concept of continuity of revelation could form the basis of a deeper inter-religious dialogue between Baha'is and followers of other world religions.<sup>8</sup> Its implications are explored by examining difficulties in the dialogue between Muslims and Christians. These two religious communities are focused on as the Baha'i writings address specific tensions between them. Furthermore, the dialogue between these two faiths has become an important issue due to geopolitical concerns since 11 September 2001, and the increasing Muslim population of the West. A number of well-known public intellectuals have commented on the potential for such a dialogue. Jonathan Glover, an ethicist at the University of London, argues for a wider dialogue between the West and Islam in a recent article in the *Guardian* newspaper:

As the assassination at Sarajevo and the response to it triggered the 20th-century world wars, so 9/11 and the response to it could ruin our century. So much depends on whether we can break out of the cycle of violence. This requires a serious dialogue between the overlapping worlds of the West and Islam before irreversible mutual hatred sets in. We need such dialogue internationally, between western and Islamic leaders. We also need it in this country, between those who are not Islamic and those who are.<sup>9</sup>

## Continuity of revelation

From a Baha'i perspective, interfaith discourse 'must now address honestly and without further evasion the implications of the overarching truth that called the movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one'.<sup>10</sup> The oneness of religion, in the words of 'Abdul-Baha, is 'the gift of God to this enlightened age'.<sup>11</sup> How can Baha'is translate the teaching of the oneness of religion for the purposes of dialogue? I will argue that it is through the concept of continuity of revelation.

This central principle of the Baha'i Faith has received some attention in Baha'i studies,<sup>12</sup> although not in proportion to its prominence in the Baha'i writings. Shoghi Effendi describes 'the continuity of their Revelation' as the 'cardinal truth', which is the 'essence' of Baha'i teachings.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Shoghi Effendi uses three terms interchangeably: 'Baha'u'llah inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience.'<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi explains what the concept of continuity of revelation does *not* mean:

The Faith standing identified with the name of Baha'u'llah 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.<sup>15</sup>

The term 'progressive revelation' is often used to summarize the Baha'i position in relation to other religions, and is based on Baha'u'llah's statement '*fa-lammā balagha al-amr*', which Shoghi Effendi translated as 'this process of progressive revelation'.<sup>16</sup> Literally this means the 'maturation' of religion, capturing within it a sense of both commonality and progression – analogous to the maturation of an individual. As cited above, Shoghi Effendi also describes progress in relation to 'religious experience' over time.

I suggest that there is a tension between two poles – continuity and progressiveness – in the Baha'i approach to other religions. Where individuals' understanding exists on the spectrum between these poles will depend on their own spiritual state and the context in which they find themselves. Focusing on the progressiveness pole enables Baha'is to make sense of their uniqueness as a particular religious community and will be prominent in conversion-type or 'teaching' contexts. Examples of such progressiveness, Baha'is can argue, include the relevance of its laws compared to those of previous 'dispensations',<sup>17</sup> its scriptural integrity and comprehensiveness, its institutional structures and successful provisions for avoiding significant schism.

However, for the purposes of inter-religious dialogue, the continuity pole is more relevant than progressiveness. Terms such as 'progressive revelation' could be misunderstood as condescending. How can the continuity pole best be articulated? The view is presented in this paper that there are three related aspects to continuity of revelation: commonality, non-finality and non-exclusivity. Scriptures from Christianity and Islam that can form the basis of discussing this in interfaith encounters are explored. Further to the reasons cited in the introduction, focusing on dialogue and conflict resolution between these two religions will likely merit interest among intellectuals outside of those religions. For example, Salman Rushdie recently wrote that the most important challenge facing Islam will be a 'reformation' that Muslims and non-Muslims need to encourage through study of its beginnings and dialogue about this scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Rushdie believes that this scholarship should explore the Qur'an as a historical document:

If, however, the Koran were seen as a historical document, then it would be legitimate to reinterpret it to suit the new conditions of successive new ages. Laws made in the 7th century could finally give way to the needs of the 21st. The Islamic Reformation has to begin here, with an acceptance that all ideas, even sacred ones, must adapt to altered realities.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne (2002); Udo Schaefer's *Beyond the Clash of Religions* (Prague: Zero Palm Press, 1995); and Zaid Lundberg, 'The bedrock of Baha'i belief: the doctrine of progressive revelation', *Lights of Irfan*, 1 (2000): 53–67.

13. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1996) 107.
14. *ibid* 108.
15. *ibid* 108.
16. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983) 75.
17. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974) 100.
18. *The Times*, 11 August 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,1072-1729998,00.html>

19. 'The Incoming Sea of Faith', *Spectator*, 18 October 2004.
20. He stated that 'Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above all that He is the Word (*Logos*) of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived according to reason are Christian.' Furthermore, all peoples, according to Justin, are able to participate in the '*logos spermatikos*' or seed of reason: 'For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatik word (reason disseminated among men), seeing what was related to it', because 'the seed of reason (*the Logos*) implanted in every race of men' makes God's revelation accessible to all. The pre-existence of the eternal *Logos* of God enables 'all the races of men to participate' in God's revelation. The 'seed of the *Logos* is innate in all the races of men and resides in all people' uniting humanity and making all 'part of the *Logos*', Justin Martyr, 'First Apology, 36', in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. Ferdmans Pub., 1950) 178, 191.
21. Qur'an 2:172; Matt. 22:37–40.
22. M. Momen, 'Bahā'u'llāh's prophetology: archetypal patterns in the lives of the founders of the world religions', *Bahā'i Studies Review*, 5.1 (1995) 51–63, [http://bahai-library.com/bsr/bsr05/55\\_momen\\_prophetology.htm](http://bahai-library.com/bsr/bsr05/55_momen_prophetology.htm)

Another reason why the dialogue between Islam and Christianity will interest westerners is given by Alister McGrath, an Oxford professor of theology, who has argued that the two religions will continue to interact in ways important for the future of Christianity: 'The most significant, dynamic and interesting critic of western Christianity is no longer atheism, but a religious alternative, offering a rival vision of God – Islam.'<sup>19</sup>

The concept of continuity of revelation is not original to the Baha'i Faith, and there are analogous ideas in the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The clearest example is perhaps the concept of '*logos spermatikus*' in early Christianity. Justin Martyr, a second-century apologist, first presented the idea that both Gentiles and Jews will be saved on the basis of the 'seed of reason' being implanted within each person, and therefore being sensitive to development and progression.<sup>20</sup>

### Commonality

The commonality aspect of continuity of revelation is best exemplified in what is termed the 'Golden Rule' (that one should treat others as one would wish to be treated),<sup>21</sup> in the similarities in the lives of prophet-founders,<sup>22</sup> in the shared centrality of an unknowable divine essence<sup>23</sup> and the central transformative (or soteriocentric) aim of these religions. In relation to the latter, Baha'u'llah asks, 'Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?'<sup>24</sup> From a Baha'i perspective, then, it is this transformative core – the goal of the individual's spiritual transformation – that is the shared religious inheritance rather than a belief in a personal God. A theocentric view will alienate some Buddhists, Hindus and Taoists among others. Many spiritual qualities, the tools for this transformation, are therefore highlighted in religious scriptures and shared between them.<sup>25</sup>

A retrospective commonality is also stressed in the New Testament by the repeated linking of Jesus's teachings to that of Moses, especially through bringing to mind the Hebrew Bible's prophecies of the Messiah: in the words of one theologian, this 'catena of fulfilments of prophecy'.<sup>26</sup> In the Qur'an, passages describing how God does not make any distinction between prophets or between messengers are instances of retrospective commonality (2:136, 2:285), as is the view that Abraham and the apostles of Jesus were Muslims (3:67, 5:111).<sup>27</sup>

### Non-finality

The belief that any one religion is the last Divine message is one that is heavily criticized in Baha'i texts. The view that, 'all Revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed' is described as an 'idle contention' and represents 'a sore test unto all mankind'.<sup>28</sup> There are a number of reasons for this.

### Creative power of the Word

First, Biblical and Islamic scriptures state that the creative power of divine revelation cannot be stopped. For example, the Qur'an states, 'If all the trees that are upon the earth were to become pens, and if God should after

that swell the sea into seven seas of ink, His words would not be exhausted: for God is Mighty, Wise' (31:27, Rodwell's translation). Al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam of Shi'ism, apparently commented on this verse: '[God] here informs thee that the Word of God has no end, no termination, and It shall never cease at all [*akhbaraka anna Kalām Allāh laysa lahu ākhirun wa lā ghāyata wa lā yanqati'u abadan*].'<sup>29</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, the word of God is equated to rainfall. 'For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth' (Isa. 55:10–11).

### Legal developments

Second, the scriptures of these religions contain legal provisions that now appear 'archaic' in the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha. He asks a Jewish audience in North America: 'Is it possible nowadays to establish the archaic laws [*anahih muqtaḍī nīstī*]<sup>30</sup> of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth? Christ changed only that part of the Mosaic religion which did not accord with the spirit of his time.'<sup>31</sup> The situation is less clear-cut in Christianity due to its relative lack of laws, although St Paul's admonitions to women to wear veils<sup>32</sup> and not to speak in public<sup>33</sup> are thought to reflect the sociocultural context of early Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

In Islam, texts that do not assert the equality of women, such as marriage and divorce laws, inheritance rights, the treatment of adulterers and also the killing of unbelievers<sup>35</sup> are questioned by many writers as being outdated. A particularly difficult passage is one that appears to allow for the 'beating' of wives: 'And those [women] you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them' (Qur'an 4:34, Arberry's translation).<sup>36</sup> But, as Momen points out, the Qur'an supports the view that the laws of a religion can change over time for the better: 'None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar' (2:106, Yusuf Ali's translation).<sup>37</sup>

### Relativity and eschatology

A third rationale for non-finality is that the concept of the relativity of religious truth is implicitly endorsed. In the New Testament, there are suggestions that divine revelation will continue:

I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now  
(John 16:12).

Repent ye therefore ... when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord  
(Acts 3:19).<sup>38</sup>

And in the Qur'an, there are similar indications:

Exalted then be God, the King, the Truth! Be not hasty in its recital while the revelation of it to thee is incomplete. Say rather, 'O my Lord, increase knowledge unto me'  
(20:114, Rodwell's translation).

23. S. Lambden, 'Apothatic theology', in *Revising the Sacred: Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, Vol. 7 (ed. J. A. McLean, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997).
24. *Kitāb-i-Īqān, The Book of Certitude* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983) 240.
25. Some examples of shared spiritual principles are outlined in M. Momen, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995) 6–16.
26. V. Stanton, *The Gospels as Historical Documents, II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909) 342.
27. In the sense that they submitted their will to God – the literal meaning of 'Islam'.
28. *Kitāb-i-Iqān, The Book of Certitude* 162–63, 137.
29. Burhān, (=al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Bahrānī), *Kitāb al-burhān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (4 vols. Tehran, 1375/1955) 496.
30. Literally 'not conformable to exigencies', according to Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).
31. *Promulgation* 361. Also repeated to Pasteur Monnier, cited in "Abdu'l-Baha on Christ and Christianity", *Baha'i Studies Review*, 3.1 (1993) 1–6, [http://bahai-library.com/bsr/bsr03\\_1/311\\_abdulgaha\\_christianity.htm](http://bahai-library.com/bsr/bsr03_1/311_abdulgaha_christianity.htm)

32. 1 Cor. 11:5: 'But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with *her* head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.'
33. 1 Tim. 2:11–12: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.'
34. L. Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics: New Studies in Christian Ethics* (No. 9) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
35. 'As for the unbelievers, for them garments of fire shall be cut, and there shall be poured over their heads boiling water whereby whatsoever is in their bellies and their skins shall be melted; for them await hooked iron rods; as often as they desire in their anguish to come forth from it, they shall be restored into it, and: "Taste the chastisement of the burning!"' (22:20–21, Arberry's translation).
36. Translated variously as 'beat them' (Palmer), '(and last) beat them (lightly)' (Yusuf Ali), 'scourge them' (Pikthall and Rodwell), 'chastise them' (Sale). Revisionist interpretations of this verse exist, including that it means to 'pat gently' (see, e.g. <http://www.unm.edu/~reemaz/>).
37. M. Momen, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith* 20.
38. Also references to gradual disclosure of truth or revelation exist: 'I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able

A final reason that argues in favour of non-finality in these religions is the expectation of future messengers. Some Baha'i introductory literature focuses on this perspective as being the main Baha'i approach to other religions, a view that is debatable.<sup>39</sup> Caution is warranted for focusing on this aspect because, for some religions, it has been suggested that prophecy is not intended to predict future events but should be read in a contextualized way as reflecting the needs of the religious community at the time the scriptures were written. It has been argued that Zoroastrian prophecies, to take one example, are likely to be medieval texts lamenting foreign invasions of Iran, rather than an apocalyptic vision of the future.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, in Christianity and Islam, there are some interesting pointers:

Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify  
(Matt. 23:34).

And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No  
(John 1:21–22).<sup>41</sup>

O Children of Adam! There shall come to you Apostles [*rusul*] from among yourselves, rehearsing my signs to you ...  
(Qur'an 7:34, Rodwell's translation).<sup>42</sup>

As suggested above, there is the implication in these religions of future renewal. Why the need for renewal? Three reasons, in addition to the problem of obsolete laws, are suggested in Baha'i writings. First, time brings with it a loss of focus from the scriptures to man-made dogmas, creeds and personalities. Baha'u'llah identifies the decline of institutional Shi'ism to the fact that religious leaders 'turned away from the light of God and corrupted the principle of His Divine unity [*tawhīd*]', and that they 'increasingly centred their attention upon them who were only the revealers of the potency of His Word'.<sup>43</sup> Second, infighting between sects gradually saps the strength and moral force of a religion. Third, other religions have found it hard to respond to the modern challenges of secularism and materialism.<sup>44</sup>

### Non-exclusivity

A third aspect of continuity of revelation is non-exclusivity. Exclusivity is the belief that a particular religion is the only way to salvation and truth. In support of non-exclusivity, there are passages that suggest that other religions, particularly those that have preceded it, are valid. An obvious example is Islam's acceptance of the 'People of the Book' – referring to Christians, Jews, and Sabians: 'Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaeans, whoso believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness – their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them; neither shall they sorrow' (Qur'an 2:62, Arberry's translation; cf. 5:69).

One contemporary Muslim writer has suggested that the Quranic recognition of Jews and Sabians is a strong scriptural endorsement of dialogue: 'The real dialogue between religions was, however, started by the Qur'an. Its recognition of the People of the Book – the believers in God spread all over the earth, the Sabaeans and the Jews – was a dialogical recognition.'<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the Sabians provide a potential bridge for Islam to embrace non-Abrahamic religious traditions, a view that was suggested by the early Baha'i scholar Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani,<sup>46</sup> although there has never been much consensus about who constitutes the 'People of the Book' in Islamic history.<sup>47</sup> Fazlur Rahman, the late Muslim academic, points out that there is no particular reason to focus on the first half of the above verse. Rather, the rest of it is itself a 'strong rejection of exclusivism': 'the vast majority of Muslim commentators exercise themselves fruitlessly to avoid having to admit the obvious meaning: that those – from any section of humankind – who believe in God and in the Last Day and do good deeds are saved'.<sup>48</sup>

Another contemporary Islamic thinker has emphasized the verse: 'O humanity! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other. Truly the most-honoured of you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious of you' (Qur'an 49:18). Hussain notes that the passage is addressed to all of humanity, rather than only Muslims, and the positive value placed on differences in the world. In addition, he highlights the fact that it encourages people to transcend their differences and learn from each other. Hussain reads it as not saying that Muslims are better than other people, 'but that the best people are those who are aware of God'.<sup>49</sup>

There are three other indications of the non-exclusivity of Islam. First, in food and marriage, two of the most significant areas of social life, eating and marriage with People of the Book are permitted. Second, the religious laws of the Jews and Christians are upheld (Qur'an 5:47) and were even enforced by Muhammad when disputes arose among them (Qur'an 5:42–3). Finally, the preservation of the various places of worship, 'cloisters, churches, synagogues and mosques' (Qur'an 22:40), is upheld. It has been argued that this is not only because they play a role in the culture of a community but that the Qur'an is here acknowledging the validity of diverse religious expression.<sup>50</sup>

In Christianity, there is a clear basis for pluralism in the way that Jesus Christ acted towards non-believers, and in passages such as Acts 10:34: 'But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him' and 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets' (Heb. 1:1).

The notion that any one religion holds the sole message of salvation is also strongly criticized in Baha'i writings. It has been suggested that exclusivist views rest on a misinterpretation of scripture, a misrepresentation of the full range of worldviews promoted in these religions, and a misunderstanding of the language of scripture – arguments mainly based on hermeneutics.<sup>51</sup> In addition, exclusivist views are characteristic of human, imperfect thinking: 'To presume to judge among the Messengers of God, exalting one above the other, would be to give in to the delusion that the Eternal and All-Embracing is subject to the vagaries of human preference'.<sup>52</sup>

### **Exclusivity and comparative religion**

There are two further arguments against exclusivity. The first is from the perspective of comparative religion and is based on the observation that exclusivist claims in one religion are not unique, and are occasionally

[to bear it], neither yet now are ye able' (1 Cor. 3:2); 'But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, [even] those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil' (Heb. 5:14); and more circumstantially, 'For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear' (Mark 4:28, emphasis added).

39. e.g. see the first edition of the magazine *The Baha'is* published by the Baha'i International Community (1992). The BBC website has a balanced portrayal (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/bahai/index.shtml>). Lundberg ('The bedrock of Baha'i belief') has argued that 'progressive revelation' is a more central theme.
40. C. Buck, 'Baha'u'llah as Zoroastrian Saviour', *Baha'i Studies Review*, 8 (1998), [http://bahai-library.com/bsr/bsr08/821\\_buck\\_zoroaster.htm](http://bahai-library.com/bsr/bsr08/821_buck_zoroaster.htm)
41. This quote is intriguing as it implies the expectation of three eschatological figures for the Jews: Elias (who Jesus said was John the Baptist), 'that prophet' (who could be interpreted as Muhammad), and the Christ. Mirza Abu'l-Fadl suggests that 'that prophet' refers to Muhammad (*Letters and Essays* [Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1985] 179).
42. See S. Fazel and K. Fanapanazir, 'A Baha'i approach to the claim

of finality in Islam', *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, 5:3 (1993), [http://bahai-library.com/?file=fananapazir\\_fazel\\_finality\\_islam](http://bahai-library.com/?file=fananapazir_fazel_finality_islam), for a discussion of the original Arabic of this text in relation to this and other translations of the Qur'an. A good overview of Islamic prophecies is provided in M. Momen, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith*, chapter 4.

43. Cited in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1972) 173.
44. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* 179–86.
45. A. Askari, 'The dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam', in *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue* (ed. L. Swidler, Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 1992).
46. *Miracles and Metaphors* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1981) 100.
47. F. Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997) 153.
48. F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989) 166.
49. A. Hussain, 'Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith dialogue', in *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, (ed. O. Safi, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003) 251–69.
50. F. Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 160–1.

mirrored in one another. For example, the two most important claims to exclusivity in Christianity – the nature of Jesus Christ and his resurrection – are not unique ones. John Hick points out that the Mahayanist doctrine of the Three Bodies (Trikaya) of the Buddha parallels the Christian concept of the Trinity. The earthly or incarnate Buddha (Nirmanakaya) and the transcendent or heavenly Buddha (Sambhogakaya) are one in the Dharma Body (Dharmakaya) or the Ultimate Reality.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus is not presented in the New Testament as a unique event. For example, Matthew reports that at the time of the crucifixion: 'And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose ... and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many' (Matt. 27:53). The fact that these events were not reported in the histories of the time does not necessarily mean that they did not happen – rather, it implies that they were not perceived as unusual events.<sup>54</sup> By focusing on the resurrection as a central plank of the exclusivist argument, Christians may be downplaying the uniqueness of Jesus.

Another argument used against exclusivity is the problem encountered by interpreting texts in an exclusive way for a particular religion's understanding of previous faiths. For example, were Christians to read Biblical texts in an exclusive fashion, this would preclude the emergence of any subsequent revelation based on the literal reading of some Hebrew Bible texts:

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish [ought] from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you

(Deut. 4:2; cf. 12:32).

My salvation is gone forth ... But my salvation shall be forever

(Isa. 51:5–6).

Despite the Islamic doctrine of corruption of previous scriptures, there are passages that depict the Bible as complete:

Moreover, We gave Moses the Book, completing (Our favour) to those who would do right, and explaining all things in detail, and a guide and a mercy ... so follow it and be righteous

(Qur'an 6:154, Yusuf Ali's translation).

### Potential problems in the dialogue with Christians

There are a number of potential problems with a non-exclusive presentation of Christianity. The first is the 'remarkable universality of the biblical message as it stands'.<sup>55</sup> In support, Paul states that God was reconciling the whole world in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:19), and John sees a rainbow overarching the throne of God, reminding believers of God's covenant with all humanity (Rev. 4:3). The New Testament reports that God desires all to be saved, and Jesus died for the sins of the whole world (1 Tim. 2:4; 1 John 2:2). In effect, Christians may argue that, although the message of the New Testament is non-exclusive, it is nonetheless universal and more powerful than other revelations. A second problem is that Christians claim that Jesus's revelation was 'the eschatologically final (definitive and unsurpassable) revelation'.<sup>56</sup>

In support are quotes such as: 'In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he created the world' (Heb. 1:2). The need to read such texts in the context of other, non-finality texts needs to be stressed.

A third problem in relation to commonality between the religions is the view that the ontological truths allegedly uniting the religions are in fact truths about entirely different things. In other words, it is argued that there is a deep rift between the different religions in their descriptions of God, life after death, the central problem afflicting human beings, and other central beliefs. It is contended that the metaphor of the blind men describing the elephant, that is used to explain how the different religions are all talking about the same ultimate reality, is not relevant, as the blind men are actually describing different things.<sup>57</sup> In response, John Hick argues that the believer's individual response to the religions' ethical imperatives is the determining issue, not their descriptions of ontology: 'By their fruit, ye shall know them' (Matt. 7:16). An interesting passage in this context is from Matthew's gospel and suggests that performing the 'will' of the Father is the religious duty of Christians, and superficial proclamations of belief are not sufficient: 'Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven' (Matt. 7:22). The dialogue theologian Paul Knitter comments, 'Not knowing whether Jesus is unique, whether he is the final or normative word of God for all times, does not interfere with commitment to the praxis of following him and working, with other religions, in building the kingdom. Such questions need not be answered now. In fact . . . they cannot be answered now. In the meantime, there is much work to be done. Not those who proclaim "only Lord, only Lord", but those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:21–23).'<sup>58</sup> An analogous situation can be found in the Qur'an's linking of the rejection of God and faith to the denial of mercy and compassion to the poor: 'Have you observed the one who belies *al-din* [the faith]? That is the one who is unkind to the orphan, and urges not the feeding of the needy' (107:1–3).<sup>59</sup> This parallels Baha'u'llah's teaching in the Book of Certitude, quoted above, that what unites the religions is their focus on transformation of the individual.<sup>60</sup> By implication, this puts ethics at the heart of religion.<sup>61</sup>

## Baha'is and religious pluralism

Although Baha'i texts explicitly state the divine origin of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, there remains a problem with those religions that are not mentioned. However, the Baha'i writings have a pluralist moment, similar to the wider meaning of the Sabians in the Qur'an or what defines a believer in the Acts of the Apostles (both cited above). 'Abdu'l-Baha widens the Baha'i understanding of what religions and spiritualities the Baha'i Faith recognizes when he states that 'the Call of God' (*nida-yi ilāhi*) had been raised among the people of North America'.<sup>62</sup> It would appear, then, that the Baha'i writings endorse the appearance of native messengers of God who are not named in the Baha'i writings.

In summary, the Baha'i teachings present a spectrum of attitudes towards other religions from progressiveness to continuity. I have argued

51. An extended discussion of this appears in S. Fazel, 'Understanding Exclusionist Texts', in *Scripture and Revelation*, (ed. M. Momen, Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), [http://bahai-library.com/?file=fazel\\_understanding\\_exclusionist\\_texts](http://bahai-library.com/?file=fazel_understanding_exclusionist_texts)
52. *One Common Faith*.
53. J. Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977) 168–9.
54. *ibid* 170.
55. C. Pinnock, 'An evangelical response to Knitter's five theses', in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter* (eds. L. Swidler and P. Mojzes, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997) 118.
56. K-J. Kuschel, "'Faithful" to the New Testament?', in *The Uniqueness of Jesus* 89.
57. The metaphor of the blind men is that four blind men are describing an elephant, and each describes something different. The blind men in this analogy represent the different religions.
58. Paul F. Knitter, 'Toward a liberation theology of religions', in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (eds. J. Hick and P. F. Knitter, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998) 178–218.
59. F. Esack, *The Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* 156.
60. *Kitab-i-Iqan, The Book of Certitude* 240.
61. M. Momen, 'Relativism: A basis

- for Baha'i metaphysics', in *Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, Vol. 5 (ed. M. Momen, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988).
62. C. Buck, 'Native messengers of God?', in *Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Baha'i Thought* (eds. S. Fazel and J. Danesh, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2002).
63. 'To the World's Religious Leaders' (2002).
64. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 445–6.
65. *Paris Talks* 48–9.
66. *ibid* 49.
67. H. Küng et al., *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (trans. Peter Heinegg, New York: Doubleday, 1986) 25–6.

that the continuity pole should be the focus of an intellectual and theological dialogue with other religions that Baha'is could undertake. The paper has attempted to develop the concept of continuity of revelation and suggests that it incorporates the related themes of commonality, non-finality and non-exclusivity. Finality and exclusivity have been highlighted as 'suffocating impulses to unity' by the Universal House of Justice in its message to the world's religious leaders, urging the 'renunciation of all those claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the single greatest factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence'.<sup>63</sup>

### Theological Rubicons *Acknowledging the prophet-founders*

A particular area to which Baha'is can contribute is in the intellectual dialogue between Christians and Muslims. 'Abdu'l-Baha provides examples of this in his public lectures in the West. In a number of meetings with Jews in North America, including public talks at synagogues, 'Abdu'l-Baha challenged the Jews present to accept the divinity of Jesus. His rationale was twofold. He argued that Jesus had done more than any Jew in disseminating Jewish scripture, and in bringing about a general recognition of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. He also appealed to pragmatism in suggesting that there was little to lose from accepting Jesus as a prophet and much to gain.<sup>64</sup> 'Abdu'l-Baha presented an analogous situation in relation to Christianity acknowledging Islam. In a public talk in Paris, he argued that Christians should accept the divinity of Muhammad. His argument was that Muhammad had revered Jesus and the prophets of Israel: 'Muhammad recognized the sublime grandeur of Christ and the greatness of Moses and the prophets.'<sup>65</sup> He also suggested that there was no loss of faith for the Muslims who had done this: 'The people of Islam who glorify Christ are not humiliated by so doing.' He concludes with a general challenge: 'why should not the followers of each prophet recognize and honour the other prophets also?'<sup>66</sup>

I would suggest that this exemplifies an approach that Baha'is could take in inter-religious dialogue – to challenge the Jews to accept Jesus as a prophet, and Christians to do the same in relation to Muhammad. Interestingly, the Catholic theologian Hans Küng has made a significant contribution in this area by highlighting seven historical parallels between Muhammad and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible:<sup>67</sup>

1. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad did not base his actions on any mission given to him by the community but on his special relationship with God.
2. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad was a man with a staunch will. He was wholly imbued with his divine vocation, totally taken up by God's calling, exclusively absorbed in his mission.
3. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad spoke amidst a religious and social crisis. With passionate piety and a revolutionary message, he stood up against the wealthy ruling class and the traditions of the age.
4. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad wished to be nothing but God's mouthpiece and to proclaim God's word, not his own.

5. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad tirelessly glorified the one God, who tolerates no other gods before him and is the kindly Creator and merciful Judge.
6. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad exhorted his followers to practise unconditional obedience, devotion and 'submission' (the literal meaning of 'Islam') to God.
7. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad linked his monotheism to humanism, connecting faith in the one God and his judgement to the demand for social justice. The unjust are warned that they will go to hell, while the just are promised paradise.

68. *ibid* 27.

69. P. Knitter, 'Hans Küng's Theological Rubicon', in L. Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) 225.

70. M. Momen, 'Bahā'u'llāh's prophetology', *Baha'i Studies Review*, 5:1 (1995) 51–63.

In this work, Küng implies that Muhammad was more than a prophet by referring to him as 'the model for the kind of life that Islam wishes to be'.<sup>68</sup> It is notable that the understanding of Muhammad as 'a model' is possibly similar to how the early disciples viewed Jesus – as an eschatological prophet who was intimately infused with God's presence and who could speak, represent and mediate God. Paul Knitter concludes from their roles as archetypes of human perfection that there is a significant similarity: 'Therefore, in its origins, the Christian view of Jesus was essentially the same as the Muslim view of Muhammad: they were both unique revealers, spokespersons for God, prophets.' Knitter also contends, in a perceptive critique of Küng's position,

I suspect that, like many Christians today, he [Küng] stands before a theological Rubicon. To cross it means to recognize clearly, unambiguously, the possibility that other religions exercise a role in salvation history that is not only valuable and salvific but perhaps equal to that of Christianity; it is to affirm that there may be other saviours and revealers; besides Jesus Christ and equal to Jesus Christ. It is to admit that if other religions must be fulfilled in Christianity, Christianity must, just as well, find fulfilment in them.<sup>69</sup>

What would be a Baha'i view of this approach? First, the Baha'i writings highlight other parallels between the prophet-founders. For example, Moojan Momen suggests nine 'archetypal' features shared between the prophet-founders: a period of solitude and doubt; a break with the previous religion, rulers and religious leaders to whom public declaration was made; a promise of a future saviour; internal and external opposition; and migration.<sup>70</sup> These parallels are phenomenologically derived and complement those discussed by Küng. Furthermore, the Baha'i writings offer many theophanological perspectives on this issue, that is, from the study of nature of the Manifestation of God. To take one example, 'Abdu'l-Baha is reported to have said in 1913 in Budapest that Manifestations of God can be recognized by the following nine conditions:

- Firstly:* That Great Master will be the Educator of the world of humanity;
- Secondly:* His teachings must be universal and confer illumination upon mankind;
- Thirdly:* His knowledge must be innate and spontaneous, and not acquired;
- Fourthly:* He must answer the questions of all the sages, solve all the difficult problems of humanity, and be able to withstand all the persecutions and sufferings heaped upon Him;

71. Cited in W. Harmon, *Divine Illumination* (trans. Ahmad Sohrab, Boston: Tudor Press, 1915) 65–6.
72. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990) 49.
73. Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny* (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981) 377.
74. 'Impossible histories: why the many Islams cannot be simplified', *Harpers*, 305:1826 (July 2002): 69–74.
75. *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (rev. ed. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1991).
76. 'The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'an and Qur'anic Commentary: A Historical Survey (Parts I & II)', *The Bulletin of Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*, 10:2 (1991) 34–62 and 10:3 (1991) 6–40.
- Fifthly:* He must be a joy-bringer, and the Herald of the Kingdom of Happiness;  
*Sixthly:* His knowledge must be infinite and His wisdom all-comprehensive;  
*Seventhly:* The penetration of His Word and the potency of His influence must be so great as to humble even His worst enemies;  
*Eighthly:* Sorrows and tribulations must not vex Him. His courage and conviction must be God-like. Day by day He must become firmer and more zealous;  
*Ninthly:* He must be the Establisher of Universal Civilization, the Unifier of Religion, the Standard-bearer of Universal Peace, and the embodiment of all the highest and noblest virtues of the world of humanity.<sup>71</sup>

I have presented seven historical parallels from Küng, nine phenomenologically-based similarities summarized by Momen, and another nine theologically-derived ones from 'Abdu'l-Baha. Developing further these commonalities would be a rich theme for dialogue discussions that this paper is proposing as an aspect of continuity of revelation, and may provide a means to intellectually address the issue for religionists to acknowledge each other's prophet-founders.

### ***Misinformation and disinformation about Islam***

An informed and impartial understanding of Islam is an essential part to any dialogue between Muslims and other religionists. Many writers and academics have achieved recognition and influence on the basis of their attempts to inform western readers about Islam, although they occasionally suffer from biased and limited viewpoints. Nevertheless, they are widely read and commented upon despite these limitations. Examples in English include Karen Armstrong's introductory books on Islam and Bernard Lewis's various works. French writers on Islam have also become prominent such as Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy, Eric Rouleau and André Raymond. Interestingly, Shoghi Effendi anticipated the importance of having an unbiased education about Islam as far back as 1939. He stated that a 'sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islām' and a study of the Qur'an was necessary for western Baha'is,<sup>72</sup> and he remarked that George Townshend's book, *Christ and Baha'u'llah*, which is predominantly an introduction to Islam for western readers, was his 'crowning achievement'.<sup>73</sup> Thus, a major Baha'i contribution to inter-religious dialogue could be to promote the understanding of Islam in the West among the general population and academia. Edward Said's review of Bernard Lewis's 'What went wrong – Islam and the West' is the type of discourse that Baha'is should be engaging in.<sup>74</sup> Said's insightful critique outlines some basic prerequisites for writing about Islam. Martin Lings's book on the life of Muhammad<sup>75</sup> is a model of a study that is both academically informed and judicious in its use of sources. Certain Baha'i historians, including Hasan Balyuzi and Moojan Momen, have also written sympathetic and academically informed accounts of Islamic history. The work of Todd Lawson, looking at alternative Islamic understandings of the crucifixion of Christ, is another excellent example of this type of contribution in an academic context.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond the challenges of the Christian-Muslim dialogue, the crossing of Rubicons needs to occur beyond the Abrahamic family of religions; so, for example, Christian attempts to understand Gautama Buddha, and Buddhists'

to understand Jesus should continue. Exploring commonalities in the lives of the prophet-founders may assist this process. From a Baha'i perspective, a vital bridge for Muslims to cross is the acceptance of Baha'u'llah, bringing with it the possibility of a cessation of the persecution of Baha'is in many Islamic countries.

## Conclusion

This paper has aimed to present a novel Baha'i contribution to inter-religious dialogue, one that is based on developing intellectual bridges between the religions. It is argued that the concept of continuity of revelation is a framework within which religions can dialogue about their differences and similarities. Some preliminary aspects of this concept have been outlined from scripture and current scholarship in Christianity and Islam. The article concludes that a central agenda for inter-religious dialogue for this century should be a theophanological one, a study of the nature and life of the Manifestation of God. In the particular context of Christian-Muslim dialogue, a challenge presented in the Baha'i writings is what the prophetic career of Muhammad represents for Christians. The importance for Baha'is of contributing to the western discourse on Islam is highlighted.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the doyen of academic comparative religion, has stated: 'If we must have a rivalry among the religious communities of earth, might we not for the moment at least rival each other in our determination and capacity to promote reconciliation.'<sup>77</sup> Baha'is hope that their contribution will be significant in the future in many ways, but at the current time, it may rival the other religions in its clear and challenging ideas about how religions share a vision of the continuity of revelation, and acknowledge a common view about the nature and career of their prophet-founders.<sup>78</sup>

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77. 'The Christian in a religiously plural work', in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings* (ed. J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001) 51.

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