

FINDING THE LAMP

MY BAHÁ'Í EXPERIENCE

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Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.
Baha'u'llah

I HAVE ATTEMPTED IN THIS PAPER to describe my encounter with the Bahá'í Faith. My personal adventure of faith was probably instigated by my background where faith and reason talked to each other. My knowledge of biblical themes and history, my oriental ethnic heritage as well as my curiosity for Eastern cultures might also have been instrumental in inclining me towards the teachings of Baha'u'llah, the Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith (1817-1892) when I was 17 years old. My perceptions of their inclusiveness, spirituality and agenda for the future are discussed below, intertwined with a personal life narrative.

The East and the West

I have Arab, Spanish, Amerindian and Scottish blood in my veins. The latter was brought by Alfred Ward, my maternal great-grandfather, whose genes left a sequel of freckles, red hair and blue eyes which, after four generations, still continue surprising the family. His marriage with my great-grandmother, a mixture of Indigenous and Spanish heritage, yielded two children who were brought up within a provincial religiosity. The whole family rapidly progressed towards intellectual and academic pursuits.

Born in Lima, Peru, I grew up honouring my grandparents' religious traditions. From Christianity I learned about loving God and his creation. The most important attribute that Christianity taught me during those early years was reverence for the sacred and the ancient. Behind the rituals and the observances, one could perceive centuries of tradition and a legacy which had amalgamated nations and connected generations, providing a

sense of permanence and identity to the individual and society. This sense of sacredness attracted me and led me to get acquainted with Christian theology and history, including an intense reading of biblical texts.

If my mother's family provided the intellect, my father's gave me the dreams and the imagination. My Handal grandparents had left Palestine in the 1920s like many Christian Arab families. They were part of a massive migration to the Americas, instigated by the unstable political and religious conditions in the Holy Land. They came from Bethlehem – the cradle of Christendom – where their Middle East ancestry traced many generations back. They too were strong believers, especially the two Handal aunties who had become nuns.

As a child I was enchanted by narratives from their motherland. I remember my father telling me that we were descended from a family of green turbans and white elephants. I was also told that the Handals were the descendants of three German crusader brothers who, many centuries ago, decided to settle in the Holy Land and married locals.

Whether these accounts were true, I do not know, but they added to my eager reading of the *Thousand and One Nights* and many other fairytales. The stories about the sultans, Sinbad the Sailor, Ali Baba, Scheherazade, Aladdin, exotic desert caravans with camels and the like awakened my curiosity for anything oriental, including movies and books. Their narratives intrigued me as they seemed to be so alive and human.

Encounter with the Bahá'í Faith

My heart was already with that world, whether it is called Arab or Islamic, when I encountered the Bahá'í Faith at the age of 17, over 40 years ago. Through it, I was able to understand that the revelations of all prophets came from the same God. In the Bahá'í Faith I had found a place for inter-faith benevolence and acceptance.

My new framework was called progressive revelation, which is a core principle of the Bahá'í Faith. Furthermore, it included Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh like a divine chain. According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, messengers of God have appeared at intervals throughout history to establish the world's great religions. 'Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above', Bahá'u'lláh has stated.¹ The claims to the finality of their religions were actually human elaborations which had created huge divisions in humanity as well as bloody wars.

¹ Bahá'í World Centre. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 50. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.

What I found in the Bahá'í Faith was that the essence of all religions was the same: worship God, pray, be just, patient, kind and the like. I discovered that the practice of virtues and spiritual qualities is perennial throughout all creeds. Christ taught us to love our neighbours whereas Bahá'u'lláh directed to love all humankind. Christ taught us to be 'fishers' of men while Bahá'u'lláh asked us to become 'quickeners' of humankind. Christ exhorted, 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise' (Luke 6:31), Muhammad said, 'None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself',² while Bahá'u'lláh instructed 'Choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself'.³

As a seeker I found in Bahá'u'lláh's utterances a close resemblance to the spirit of the Gospel:

The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct.⁴

Beware, O people of Bahá, lest ye walk in the ways of them whose words differ from their deeds.⁵

O Son of Being! Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning.⁶

Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.⁷

Holy words and pure and goodly deeds ascend unto the heaven of celestial glory.⁸

Breath not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner.⁹

The quest for world peace and unity

I was attracted by the Bahá'í Faith's universality, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Bahá'í discourse was full of statements like, 'The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.' In my early contacts with the Bahá'ís I was taught that the term 'religion' comes from the word *ligare*, that is, unite or amalgamate. I found very refreshing Bahá'u'lláh's passages about the unity of the world having religion as the main vehicle, such as:

² Wattles, J. *The Golden Rule*, p. 56. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

³ Bahá'í World Centre. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 64. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.

⁴ Bahá'í World Centre. Cited in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 24-25. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.

⁵ Bahá'í World Centre. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 305. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994.

⁶ Bahá'í World Centre. *The Hidden Words*, p. 11. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 10.

The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife. The religion of God and His divine law are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men. The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God. Religion bestoweth upon man the most precious of all gifts, offereth the cup of prosperity, imparteth eternal life, and showereth imperishable benefits upon mankind.¹⁰

Another aspect of the Bahá'í Faith's appeal was that its discourse centred on higher order concepts such as the oneness of God, the unity of all religions and the unification of the human race. The Bahá'í Faith kept a strong focus on the future. 'God hath forgiven what is the past'¹¹ was Bahá'u'lláh's categorical direction. The Bahá'í teachings made me think of other purposes of religion, such as the elimination of racial, religious or national prejudices, the abolition of extremes of poverty and wealth, the establishment of an international tribunal of justice to preserve universal peace, and the adoption of an international language to facilitate communication and understanding among nations.

I was impressed by the vastness of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, contained in no less than one hundred volumes on a variety of mystical, social and ethical issues including laws and ordinances. He wrote fearless epistles to kings and rulers of the time such as Queen Victoria, Pope Pius IX, Napoleon III, Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, the Shah of Iran, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany and Czar Alexander II of Russia.

I was also fascinated by the richness of the early history of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, the old Persia. This was a movement, with heroes, martyrs, sages and saints, which was born accompanied by the killing of 20,000 of its followers. Such fanaticism reminded me of the trial and death of Christ and the subsequent martyrdom of so many early Christians. The Báb (1819-1850), meaning the Gate in Arabic, was Bahá'u'lláh's herald and, like John the Baptist, Christ's announcer, had been similarly killed in the name of God and religion. My fertile adolescent imagination indulged itself as I was taken to the years of the early history of the Bahá'í Faith and recreated those stories of audacity and faith which, in a way, resembled the evangelising spirit of the first Christian communities. This history inspired me and kept me moving

¹⁰ Bahá'í World Centre. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 129-130. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 219.

forward until I eventually accepted Baha'u'llah as the Messenger of God for this new age.

During my study of the Bahá'í Faith I was told that I was not abandoning my previous religious background. Rather, these new teachings were going to help me understand my previous background. With that assurance, the journey did not become traumatic. At no moment did I experience any criticism or condemnations of my previous religious practices or traditions. Christ was still considered the son of God, the face and mirror of the invisible God itself. Jesus was still the Messiah of the Old Testament and Mary remained the virgin mother.

In the Bahá'í Faith I learned that there is one God and all world religions come from the same God. The interpretation of Scripture took a different turn where prophecies such as 'Thy kingdom come' had to be construed away from their literal meaning. Likewise, the reading of verses like 'Let the dead bury their dead' or the metaphor of baptism with fire opened for me a door to explore new concepts. If Scripture had a spiritual meaning, then concepts such as the miracles themselves, or the prophecies, held more than a literal significance

Final thoughts

I am now, in my fifties, still discovering new spiritual insights, enjoying meeting people from all faiths and visiting their temples in this multireligious Australia. With a teenager's spirit I keep discovering the mysteries of life and travelling along the journey which, according to the Bahá'í writings, goes beyond death and does not end. The progress of the soul is a process that does not stop at the last breath, but continues forever in the spiritual worlds of God.

From time to time, I walk into the historical churches of Sydney city, where I have been living for the past 20 years, and sit quietly to say some prayers. Inside the temples I truly feel I am at the Lord's house like the old times. Perhaps there are as many paths to reach God as there are people. Christ explains these factors through the parable of the seeds (Mark 4:13-20) where some seeds randomly landed by the wayside, some on stony ground, others among thorns, and yet others - the lucky ones - on fertile ground. Some people believed after seeing a miracle (Luke 7:11), Paul repented after encountering a blinding light and a divine voice on his road to Damascus (Acts, 9:4-6), Emperor Constantine converted through a dream, while Saint Augustine did by hearing a child's voice singing. Matthew did not need any major sign or proof - he accepted Christ almost immediately and left

everything behind without asking much (Mark 2:14), like the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John (Mathew 4:18-22). I prefer to think of myself as a fortunate 17-year-old Alladin who, as in my childhood stories, unexpectedly came across a marvellous lamp inspiring his life.