

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Chapter 31 of Some Answered Questions

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Some Answered Questions is a book of the answers that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave to questions put to Him by Laura Clifford Barney in the house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in ‘Akka in the early 1900s. The Persian and English texts of these replies were published in 1908. The Persian text was seen, corrected by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His own hand and approved by Him with the affixing of His seal. The English text has a number of problems and is currently being retranslated.

One of the questions put to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked Him for an explanation of the verse in the Bible (in the ensuing quotations from the Bible, the Authorised King James Version is given first with the Revised Standard Version in parentheses afterwards):

Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come. (Matt. 12:31-32: Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.)

Since this is a quotation from Christian scripture it is first necessary to put it into its Christian context and to see what Christian theologians and commentators on the Bible have said about it. The verse comes in the context of a story about a man ‘possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb’ (22: a blind and dumb

demoniac) who was brought to Jesus and healed. The people were amazed, saying 'Is this not the son of David' (23: 'Can this be the Son of David?') — in other words: can this be the Messiah who was to spring from the loins of David? But the Pharisees, no doubt fearing for their station and their following, said: 'This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils' (24: It is only by Be-el'zebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons) — and therefore he is not the son of David. Beelzebub was the ringleader of the apostasy from God and rebellion against him. But Jesus refuted the Pharisees through logic, saying 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand' (25: Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand) so why would Satan or Beelzebub cast out devils — why would he act against himself? (26: 'and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?'). And if he is to be accused of casting out demons through Beelzebub, then what about those from among the Jews who also cast out demons (and about whom it was said that they did this through the Spirit of God)? He thus condemns them for making their judgments not out of justice but out of prejudice. He then goes on to point out that this is in fact a proof of His mission:

But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man and then he will spoil his house? He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad. (28-30: But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.)

Then there comes the verses that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked to comment upon and, following these, there are verses that expand upon this point:

Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how

can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. (33-37: 'Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! how can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.')

The following is an abbreviated version of the commentary of Matthew Henry (1662-1714), an English non-conformist clergyman in his *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (1708-1710) on this verse.¹ He states that this verse gives the 'gracious assurance of the pardon of all sin upon gospel terms', that 'the greatness of sin shall be no bar to our acceptance with God, if we truly repent and believe the gospel.' The only exception to this is '*the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*, which is here declared to be the only unpardonable sin.' In explaining this, he harks back to a few verses earlier: '*But Jesus knew their thoughts*, (v. 25). It is not all speaking against the person or essence of the Holy Ghost, or some of his more private operations, or merely the resisting of his internal working in the sinner himself, that is here meant; for *who then should be saved?*' Further on he says: 'this blasphemy is excepted, not for any defect of mercy in God or merit in Christ, but because it inevitably leaves the sinner in infidelity and impenitency.' He goes on to say that 'those who blasphemed Christ when he was here upon earth, and called him a Winebibber, a Deceiver, a Blasphemer, and the like, they had some colour of excuse, because of the meanness of his appearance, and the prejudices of the nation against him; and the proof of his divine mission was not perfected till after his ascension; and therefore, upon their repentance, they shall be pardoned'.

Matthew Henry then goes on to tie in the 'blasphemy against the Holy Ghost' with the Pentecostal appearance of the Holy Spirit saying that although during the ministry of Jesus some may have been confused about His station, all reasonable doubt was removed with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost:

But if, when the Holy Ghost is given, in his inward gifts of revelation, speaking with tongues, and the like, such as were the distributions of the Spirit among the apostles, if they continue to blaspheme the Spirit likewise, as an evil spirit, there is no hope of them that they will ever be brought to believe in Christ.

John Wesley gives a much shorter and more direct explanation:

The blasphemy against the Spirit: How much stir has been made about this? How many sermons, yea, volumes, have been written concerning it? And yet there is nothing plainer in all of the Bible. It is neither more nor less than the ascribing those miracles to the power of the devil, which Christ wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Whosoever speaketh against the Son of man: In any other respects: It shall be forgiven him – Upon his true repentance: But whosoever speaketh thus against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven, neither in this world nor in the world to come – This was a proverbial expression among the Jews, for a thing that would never be done. It here means farther, He shall not escape the punishment of it, either in this world, or in the world to come. The judgment of God shall overtake him, both here and hereafter.²

The equivalent to Beelzebub (Beelzebul) and Lucifer in the Apocrypha of the Bible,³ the personification of rebellion against God, is, in the Qur'an, Iblis, the angel who is ordered to bow down before Adam and refuses and is therefore cast out of heaven and becomes Satan. It is thus pride and disobedience that cause his fall:

It is We who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels bow down to Adam, and they bowed down; not so Iblis; he refused to be of those who bow down. (God) said: 'what prevented thee from bowing down when I commanded thee?' He said: 'I am better

than he: thou didst create me from fire and him from clay.' (God) said: 'Get thee down from this: it is not for thee to be arrogant here: get out, for thou art of the meanest (of creatures).'⁴

In Shi'i Islam, a parallel with 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' can be seen in the concept of those such as Abu Bakr, 'Umar and Mu'awiya who opposed the Imams as successors to the Prophet Muhammad and prevented them from gaining their rightful place. In one of his orations which have been compiled in the *Nahj al-Balaghah*, 'Ali refers to the fact that Abu Bakr knowingly and deliberately went against the expressed wish of Muhammad when he took over the leadership of Islam (the caliphate) instead of giving this to 'Ali whom Muhammad had named: 'By God the son of Abu Quhafah [Abu Bakr] dressed himself with it [the caliphate] and he certainly knew that my position in relation to it was the same as the position of the axis in relation to the hand-mill. The flood water flows down from me and the bird cannot fly up to me.'⁵

Also related to this theme are 'Ali's words in another oration, when he reminds his followers of events at the Battle of Siffin and of how his enemy Mu'awiyah, at the battle of Siffin, had used the outward appearance of piety to advance his inner designs of enmity and his desire to grasp the leadership:

When they had raised the Qur'an by way of deceit, craft, artifice and cheat, did you not say: 'They are our brothers and our comrades in accepting Islam. They want us to cease fighting, and ask for protection through the Book of Allah, the Glorified. Our opinion is to agree with them and to end their troubles.' Then I said to you, 'In this affair the outward appearance of it is faith but the inner reality is enmity. Its beginning is pity and the end is repentance. Consequently you should stick to your position, and remain steadfast on your path. You should press your teeth (to put all your might) in jihad and should not pay heed to the shouts of the shouter. If he is answered he would mislead, but if he is left (unanswered) he will be disgraced.'⁶

Let us now proceed to consider what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says about this verse from St Matthew's Gospel. He states that the Manifestations of God have two aspects – one is the place of manifestation (i.e. the physical body of the Manifestation) which can be compared to the globe of the sun, and the other

the 'resplendency' of the Manifestation (the divine qualities of the Manifestations), which are like the heat and light coming from the sun. It is the latter which is the defining characteristic of the Manifestation; if it were not present then that individual would not be the Manifestation. This appearance of divine qualities in the person of the Manifestation is the appearance of the Holy Spirit in them.⁷

If a person, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, remains remote from the Manifestation, this can be corrected. The person did not recognize the appearance of divine attributes in the Manifestation but may be awakened from this state. If however, a person hates the divine attributes themselves, in other words hates the Holy Spirit, then this is a state that has no remedy and cannot be forgiven; this person cannot be awakened from this state because they are already fully aware that the Manifestation is the possessor of divine attributes but they hate those attributes and thus must remain far from the Manifestation. The Manifestations dispense the bounties of God through the Holy Spirit that appear in them, not through their personality, therefore if a person hates the Holy Spirit, that person cannot receive the bounties of God, remains deprived and thus remains beyond the reach of the grace and forgiveness of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that many who were enemies of the Manifestations of God later recognized their error and were forgiven; they had been enemies of the light-holder and remained distant but once they realised that their enemy was in fact the place of the manifestation of light, they came close, their enmity was transformed into love and they were forgiven. However, those whose enmity is towards the light itself must ever remain remote and for this condition there is no remedy, no reunion and no forgiveness.⁸

This passage speaks of people who are utterly lost and have put themselves beyond the reach of God's grace and forgiveness, and the Bahá'í scriptures also condemn in the strongest possible terms those who are named covenant-breakers. Indeed some of the expressions used in this passage about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are very similar to language used regarding covenant-breakers; for example, in this Bible passage about blasphemy and the commentary upon it, it is made clear that some are ignorant of the fact that they are attacking the Holy Spirit and these are not to be considered as those who 'blaspheme against the Holy Spirit'. It is only those who are aware and knowingly do this that are considered

condemned. The same is stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá about covenant-breakers:

Thus it is seen that no means for dissension hath been left, but carnal desires are the cause of difference as it is the case with the violators. These do not doubt the validity of the Covenant but selfish motives have dragged them to this condition. It is not that they do not know what they do – they are perfectly aware and still they exhibit opposition.⁹

Thus it is tempting to equate this passage about ‘Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ with these condemnations of the covenant-breakers. There exist however a number of points that show that there may some distinction to be made.

1. In this passage it is stated that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. The Kitáb-i Aqdas states however that the greatest covenant-breaker of the time of Bahá’u’lláh, Mírzá Yahyá, can be forgiven (v. 184). This difference can be explained however by pointing out that this verse of the Kitáb-i Aqdas makes forgiveness conditional upon the repentance of Mírzá Yahyá: ‘Return unto God, humble, submissive and lowly.’ Thus it could be said that if Mírzá Yahyá repented and returned to God, he was no longer in a state of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and thus no longer in that state where God’s grace and forgiveness could not reach him.

2. The passages about covenant-breaking in the Bahá’í scriptures assign a number of motives to those who have broken the Covenant: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that they ‘have an evil intention and are thinking of leadership and of forming a party’¹⁰ or are ‘deprived of the Spirit of God and are lost in passion and are seeking leadership.’¹¹ The passage regarding ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ does not ascribe any motives to those who are in this position but rather posits a metaphysical state – an evil tree bringing forth evil fruit is the description given in the following verse (v. 33). It could however be argued that the verses preceding those mentioning ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ state that the crowd were wondering whether Jesus could be the Messiah as a result of the miracle they had observed and it was in order to counter this and to preserve their own leadership that the Pharisees made the accusation that Jesus had worked the miracle through Beelzebub and not by Divine power. Thus the Gospel passage

can be stated to ascribe motives of 'seeking leadership' to this phenomenon in the same way as the above statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá do.

3. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's last Tablet to America in which there is a long discourse on covenant-breaking and 'Abdu'l-Bahá quotes a number of verses from the Gospels as referring to this phenomenon, this passage is not mentioned.¹²

4. There are certain individuals who are described in apocalyptic terms as the 'Anti-Christ'. Since it is used in the Bahá'í authoritative texts as a generic term applying even to individuals in relation to the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, its meaning must be opposition to Holy Spirit which is equally in Christ, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It would thus appear to be synonymous with those who commit 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'. However, among those given this designation is Hájí Mírzá Áqásí, the Prime Minister of Muhammad Shah who is described as the Anti-Christ of the Bábí dispensation.¹³ He is not however regarded as a covenant-breaker. Similarly the passage in St Matthew's Gospel that refers to 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' is written in relation certain Pharisees and their opposition to Jesus and these would not be considered covenant-breakers in the Bahá'í usage of that word.

Thus it would seem that the two categories of those who 'blaspheme against the Holy Spirit' and covenant-breakers may not be wholly congruous. Certainly it would appear that there are some who fit in the first category who do not fit into the second category – but it does seem likely that all who fit into the second category are included in the first category – that is to say, all covenant-breakers fit into the category of those who 'blaspheme against the Holy Spirit'. It is of some interest to note that in discussions of covenant-breaking, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Judas Iscariot¹⁴ and to 'Umar.¹⁵

Definition and Classification of Covenant-breakers

The Universal House of Justice has described covenant-breaker thus:

When a person declares his acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God he becomes a party to the Covenant and accepts the totality of His Revelation. If he then turns round and attacks Bahá'u'lláh or the Central Institution of the Faith he violates the

Covenant. If this happens every effort is made to help that person to see the illogicality and error of his actions, but if he persists he must, in accordance with the instructions of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, be shunned as a Covenant-breaker.¹⁶

This is not however a comprehensive definition since some who have been declared covenant-breakers do not fall within this definition. This point may be further developed by considering who are and are not in this category. Those who are not Bahá'ís and oppose the Bahá'í Faith or its head (such as many Muslim and Christian religious leaders) are not usually considered Covenant-breakers; those who leave the Bahá'í Faith because they have lost faith are similarly not considered Covenant-breakers; and those who commit infractions of Bahá'í law may lose their administrative rights, but are not considered Covenant-breakers.

In considering those who are considered covenant-breakers, it is useful to create a classification of these:

1. Leadership claimants: Those who raised a claim to leadership of the Bahá'í community against the duly appointed and authorised head of the Faith. These include Mírzá Yahyá who is considered to have violated the clear instructions in the writings of the Báb not to oppose anyone who claimed to be the next Manifestation of God;¹⁷ Mírzá Muhammad 'Alí who opposed the authority of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and even plotted to have 'Abdu'l-Bahá imprisoned or killed;¹⁸ and Charles Mason Remey who claimed the Guardianship of the Bahá'í Faith after the death of Shoghi Effendi.¹⁹

2. Dissidence: This group consists of those who accept the legitimacy of the head of the Bahá'í Faith religion, but oppose his policies and actions. This group consists mostly of opponents of the Bahá'í administration such as Ruth White, who was opposed to the concept of the Bahá'í administration and tried to prove that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament was a forgery as a way of discrediting it; and Ahmad Sohrab, who opposed the concept and setting up of the Bahá'í administration in the United States. He and his associate Julie Chanler set up the New History Society as a way of spreading the Bahá'í teachings but refused to allow it to be under the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States or the Local Spiritual Assembly of New York, where it was based.

3. Disobedience: Those who disobeyed the authorized head of the Bahá'í Faith in a direct instruction from him have sometimes been regarded as covenant-breakers and been expelled. Of course it could be argued that most Bahá'ís have at one time or another failed to obey one or other of the laws of the Bahá'í Faith, which are the instructions of the head of the religion. It has however been disobedience to the administrative injunctions directed by the head of the Bahá'í Faith towards particular individuals or groups of people that have caused people to be expelled. Thus for example, Amínú'lláh Faríd was expelled when he left Haifa for Europe and North America against the instructions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who wanted to protect the Western Bahá'ís from him. Similarly in the years after World War II, Shoghi Effendi felt that the arrival of large numbers of Iranian students in the United States was swamping the American Bahá'í community and damaging its organic growth.

4. Association: Individuals associating with covenant-breakers can, if they do not cease doing so after being warned, be declared covenant-breakers. This may be considered part of the previous category, in that successive heads of the Bahá'í Faith have always instructed Bahá'ís to avoid contact with covenant-breakers and thus association with known covenant-breakers could be considered an act of disobedience to the head of the Faith. The reasoning given by the head of the Faith in this instance is however different. 'Abdu'l-Bahá likens covenant-breaking to a contagious spiritual disease and states that this is why association with covenant-breakers is forbidden. In his last tablet to the Bahá'ís of America he wrote:

In short, the point is this: 'Abdu'l-Bahá is extremely kind, but when the disease is leprosy, what am I to do? Just as in bodily diseases we must prevent intermingling and infection and put into effect sanitary laws – because the infectious physical diseases uproot the foundation of humanity; likewise one must protect and safeguard the blessed souls from the breaths and fatal spiritual diseases; otherwise violation, like the plague, will become a contagion and all will perish. In the early days, after the Ascension of the Blessed Beauty, the centre of violation was alone; little by little the infection spread; and this was due to companionship and association.²⁰

Similarly Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, warns that the Bahá'ís of the West do not sufficiently appreciate the dangers of contact with covenant-breakers:

... It is a pity that some of the Western friends, with remarkable naivete, do not grasp the fact that there is absolutely nothing keeping those who have broken the Covenant, whether Bahá'u'lláh's or the Master's, out of the Cause of God except their own inner spiritually sick condition. If they were sound, instead of diseased, and wanted to enter the service of our Faith, they would apply direct to the Guardian, and he would be able to adjudge of their sincerity and, if sincere, would welcome them into the ranks of the faithful as he did with Sydney Sprague. Unfortunately a man who is ill is not made well just by asserting there is nothing wrong with him! Facts, actual states, are what count. Probably no group of people in the world have softer tongues, or proclaim more loudly their innocence, than those who in their heart of hearts, and by their every act, are enemies of the Centre of the Covenant. The Master well knew this, and that is why He said we must shun their company, but pray for them. If you put a leper in a room with healthy people, he cannot catch their health; on the contrary they are very likely to catch his horrible ailment.²¹

Many of the members of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's family were declared covenant-breakers because of their continued association with other members of the family who had previously been declared covenant-breakers, for example three of the daughters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Rúhá, Túbá and Munavvar Khánum, as well as several of their children.

5. Children of Covenant-Breakers. This category may be considered a sub-section of the above category, but again, some different considerations apply, in that, although the same considerations of contagion apply, the association of children with their parents is not a voluntary one. Despite this, the children of covenant-breakers are regarded as covenant-breakers. The reason is given in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

The friends are sometimes surprisingly naive and superficial in their approach to the subject of Covenant-breakers. They do not seem to understand

that the descendants of Azal, with their mother's milk, drank hatred of Bahá'u'lláh, just as the descendants of Mírzá Muhammad-'Alí and his relatives have imbibed from babyhood a false concept of the Master. It takes practically a miracle to overcome this lifelong habit of wrong thought.²²

Thus for example, Parvine Afnan Shahid, the daughter of the marriage between two grand-children of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was determined by the Universal House of Justice to be a covenant-breaker in 1996, since by virtue of her continued association with this lady, another Bahá'í was declared a covenant-breaker.²³

Classification of Those who Blaspheme against the Holy Spirit

It is then possible to create a classification of those who may be regarded as having blasphemed against the Holy Spirit:

1. Covenant-Breakers according to the above classification.

2. Apostasy. Although most individuals who leave the Bahá'í community because of loss of belief are not considered any differently from those who have never been Bahá'ís, there have been a small number of persons who left the community and then began to attack it maliciously and vehemently and who are referred to in terms identical to those he used of the Covenant-breakers. Indeed, this goes back to the time of the Báb, who characterised three of his followers (Mullá Javád Baraghání, Mullá 'Abdu'l-'Alí Hirátí, and Mírzá Ibráhím Shírází), who out of jealousy towards the station of Mulla Husayn Bushru'i, left the Bábí community, joined with the Báb's enemy, the Shaykhí leader Mírzá Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani. According to Nabíl, these three persons were compared in the Báb's writing with Sámirí who, according to Islamic tradition, produced the calf for the Israelites to worship, and with Jibt and Tághút, two idol worshipped by Quraysh²⁴ B language very similar to that later used by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá with regard to the Covenant-breakers.²⁵

An apostate from the time of Shoghi Effendi was Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Husayn Taftí, known as Áváríh (1290/1873-1953), who wrote a book called Kashfu'l-Hiyal (The Uncovering of

Trickery) in three volumes attacking the Bahá'í Faith and its central figures in vitriolic and intemperate language. Shoghi Effendi urged the Bahá'ís of Iran to avoid all contact with Ávárih²⁶ and, in one of his letters to the Bahá'ís of Iran, Shoghi Effendi referred to Ávárih as a dead body which the surging ocean of the Cause of God had cast upon its shores²⁷, all very reminiscent of the actions taken and words used against covenant-breakers by both Shoghi Effendi and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Indeed, in one of his writings, Shoghi Effendi groups together 'the rejected Ávárih' with the 'the jealous covenant-breaker [Mírzá Muhammad 'Ali], the thankless Yahyá [Azal], and Karím the transgressor [Khan Kirmani]'.²⁸ Shoghi Effendi also describes Ávárih as Satan (Iblis), which is the same term used by Bahá'u'lláh ('Satan, in the garb of man') about covenant-breakers.²⁹

3. Religious Leaders and others who knowingly oppose the Bahá'í Faith. It is clear from the Kitáb-i-Íqán that not all religious leaders who oppose the Bahá'í Faith are in this category since some are stated to have opposed out of ignorance:

Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people. By their sanction and authority, every Prophet of God hath drunk from the chalice of sacrifice, and winged His flight unto the heights of glory.³⁰

Those who recognize the truth of the new religion and still oppose because of 'lust of leadership', are however in this category. The clearest example of this is Háji Mírzá Áqásí who is identified as the Anti-Christ of the Bábí religion. There are however other clerics who are stigmatized by Bahá'u'lláh with such labels as *Dhi'b* (the wolf, Shaykh Muhammad Báqir Najafí of Isfahan) and *Raqshá* (the she-serpent, Mír Muhammad Husayn Imám-Jum'ih of Isfahan), while others are condemned in his writings, such as Muhammad Karím Khán Kirmání. Interestingly, Ávárih, who was named in the previous category is also named *Raqshá* by Shoghi Effendi.³¹

Causes of Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

We may also try to assess the causes of this phenomenon. Why would anyone knowingly attack what they know to be good? The following suggested causes are not intended to be exclusive. Most individual cases contain elements of more than one. The following are some preliminary ideas on this:

1. Desire for leadership of the Bahá'í community and a jealousy of the position of power and leadership of the head of the religion. Such motives are hinted at repeatedly in the authoritative Bahá'í texts; thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*Thus it is seen that the ocean of the Covenant hath surged and surged until it hath thrown out the dead bodies – souls that are deprived of the Spirit of God and are lost in passion and self and are seeking leadership.*³²

The importance of this matter is pointed out by the Universal House of Justice:

The seriousness of Covenant-breaking is that it strikes at the very centre and foundation of the unity of mankind. If God were to allow the instrument to be divided and impaired, how then would His purpose be achieved?³³

This applies mainly of course to those in category 1 of the classification of Covenant-Breaking given above – those who contended directly for leadership, such Mírzá Muhammad 'Alí and Charles Mason Remey.

2. Rebelliousness and pride. Where there is no attempt to gain the leadership of the Bahá'í Faith, the actions of rebelling and opposing the head of the Bahá'í Faith appear to derive mainly from a refusal to submit to the leadership of the head of the religion out of pride or stubbornness. Thus for example, Ahmad Sohrab, although to some extent exhibiting a desire for leadership, was eventually expelled because of his refusal to submit to the Bahá'í administration that Shoghi Effendi was putting in place. Shoghi Effendi writes:

However, since the Master's Will was read, and the administrative order, under the Guardianship, began to be developed, he [Ahmad Sohrab] became cognizant of the fact that his personal ambition for leadership

would have to be subordinated to some degree of supervision; that he would have to obey the National and local assemblies – just like every other Bahá'í, and could not be free to teach wholly independent of any advice or supervision. This was the beginning of the defection which in the end took him outside the pale of the Faith: he refused not to be handled always as an exception, a privileged exception. In fact, if we keenly analyse it, it is almost invariably the soaring ambition and deep self-love of people that has led them to leave the Faith.³⁴

3. Contempt born of closeness. In many of the members of the family of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá who were expelled, a certain degree of contempt for the head of the religion can be seen. Simply put, the family of Bahá'u'lláh (except Bahiyyih Khánum), were unable to transfer the respect that they had for Bahá'u'lláh to the new head of the religion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Similarly, the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was unwilling or unable to transfer the respect they had for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the new head of the religion Shoghi Effendi. Thus in the case of Shoghi Effendi, they had known the head of the religion as a boy and considered that they knew his foibles and weaknesses; they did not see why they, who were also members of the "Holy Family" should be ordered around by this youngster. Indeed they considered it their duty to give Shoghi Effendi the benefit of their experience and advice. In the case of Mírzá Muhammad 'Alí's family, they thought of the leadership of the Bahá'í Faith as a family affair in which they had a share and they were annoyed with 'Abdu'l-Bahá for depriving them of what they considered their rightful claim to both the leadership and of income.

This can be most clearly seen in the case of the actions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's family. While 'Abdu'l-Bahá was alive, none of them would have ever considered any major life decision (marriage, a major journey, or the name of a child) without seeking 'Abdu'l-Bahá's advice, approval and blessing. They were unable to transfer this respect to Shoghi Effendi. Even if we leave aside the fact that Shoghi Effendi was the head of the Bahá'í faith, as eldest grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he was the head of the family and the customs of a traditional Middle Eastern family would demand that the head of the family be consulted about major life decisions and his blessing obtained. So when Shoghi Effendi's sister Ruhangiz married Nayyir Afnan while Shoghi Effendi was absent and without informing

him, and his other sister and cousin married two brothers of Nayyir Afnan (again without seeking his approval), and his brother Husayn Rabbani married a German girl without consulting him and Ruhi Afnan went off on a trip to America without his approval all of these omissions showed contempt for his headship and authority both in the family and in the Bahá'í Faith; they were deliberate and very open snubs to Shoghi Effendi which would have been evident to all of the members of the family and even to the people of Haifa and beyond. When Munib Shahid married the grand-daughter of an avowed enemy of the Bahá'í Faith, Al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem, in a Muslim ceremony, at a time when Shoghi Effendi was striving to establish the independence of the Bahá'í Faith from Islam, this was not only a personal snub to Shoghi Effendi who was not consulted but also to what he was striving to achieve for the Bahá'í Faith.

4. Desire to maintain leadership. Those clerics who opposed the Bahá'í Faith did so out of a fear for their position in society and their wealth. This includes Hájí Mírzá Áqásí, who as well as being Prime Minister, was the spiritual guide of Muhammad Shah. It also applies to the other clerics mentioned. It also brings us back to the quotation from the Gospel of St Matthew with which we started this paper, because of course the people to whom these words of Christ about 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit were directed were the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who feared for their position and wealth if the people thought that Jesus really was the Messiah, son of David.

Conclusions

In summary, a number of conclusions can thus be drawn about this phenomenon of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit:

1. This phenomenon seen in all religions. In this paper, we have seen that it is present in both Christianity and the Bahá'í faith. However, from a Bahá'í perspective, the phenomenon of covenant-breaking has also occurred in Islam with the usurpation of 'Ali's succession to the prophet Muhammad and the opposition of the Umayyad dynasty to the Imams. And so it would appear to be a general phenomenon across all religions

2. Consists of knowing opposition to the truth. The phenomenon consists of knowingly opposing and attacking the source of divine guidance.

3. Can be external to the religion. Some of the religious leaders of the previous religious dispensations who, knowing the new religion to be the truth nevertheless oppose it, are considered to be in this category.

4. Can be internal to the religion. This is opposition to the head of the Bahá'í Faith or founder of the religion or disobedience of direct instructions of that leader.

5. The motives of those engaged in this activity, insofar as they can be ascertained are those of jealousy and pride

6. Since making a judgement as to who is to be classed as having blasphemed against the Holy Spirit involves an assessment of the inner spiritual state of a person, only divinely inspired leadership can make such a judgement.

NOTES

- ¹ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, London: Cassell's, 1876. See www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.i_1.xiii.html (accessed 22 May 2008)
- ² www.christnotes.org/commentary.php?com=wes&b=40&c=12 (accessed 22 June 2008)
- ³ The Testament of Solomon (trans. F. C. Conybeare) verse 26; see www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/testamen.htm (accessed 4 September 2008)
- ⁴ Qur'an 7:11-13
- ⁵ Imam 'Ali, Khut@bah ash-Shiqshiqiyah, *Nahj al-Balaghah*. The allusion to flood water is said to denote knowledge, while it is stated that Abu Bakr had towards the end of his life likened himself to a bird.
- ⁶ Imam 'Ali, Sermon 121, *Nahj al-Balaghah*
- ⁷ *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 127
- ⁸ *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 127-8
- ⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 215-6
- ¹⁰ *The Covenant Of Bahá'u'lláh* (Manchester: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950), p. 154
- ¹¹ *Star of the West*, vol. 10, no. 14 (23 Nov. 1919), p. 265

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- ¹² *Bahá'í World Faith* (2nd edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 429-38 (see esp. pp. 431-2)
- ¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (rev. edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 164; Shoghi Effendi, *High Endeavors: Messages to Alaska* ([Anchorage]: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Alaska, 1976), p. 69
- ¹⁴ *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 432
- ¹⁵ In particular 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the words of 'Umar: 'the Book of God is enough for us' which blocked the desire of the Prophet Muhammad on his death-bed to write down the appointment of his successor. See Lawḥ-i Hizár Baytí, Muntakhabátí az Mak t b-i Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bah , vol. 4 (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2000), pp. 263-5
- ¹⁶ Letter to an individual Bahá'í dated 23 March 1975, quoted in *The Power of the Covenant*, Part Two (Thornhill, Ontario: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1987), pp. 7-8
- ¹⁷ This statement is in the Persian Bayan, Vahid 6, chap. 8
- ¹⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 249, 269-271
- ¹⁹ The most comprehensive and authoritative statement of the Bahá'í position on Mason Remey is contained in a memorandum 'Mason Remey and Those Who Followed Him' issued with a letter from the Universal House of Justice to all national assemblies, 31 January 1997. See also Adib Taherzadeh, *Child of the Covenant* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000), pp. 369-71
- ²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 438. Shoghi Effendi later had to state that this analogy should not be taken too far: '... Covenant Breaking is truly a Spiritual disease, and the whole view-point and attitude of a Covenant Breaker is so poisonous that the Master likened it to leprosy, and warned the friends to breathe the same air was dangerous. This should not be taken literally; He meant when you are close enough to breathe the same air you are close enough to contact their corrupting influence. Your sister should never imagine she, loyal and devoted, has become a "carrier".' (From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 29 July 1946 in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 183)
- ²¹ From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, April 11, 1949; in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File* (compiled by Helen Hornby, 2nd edn., New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 187
- ²² From a letter dated 18 August 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly in the compilation from the Universal House of Justice: 'Non-Association with Covenant-breakers', see bahai-library.com/unpubl.compilations/covenant-breakers.html (accessed 1 July 2008)

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- ²³ Letter of Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, 12 December 1996; Letter of National Spiritual Assembly of the New Zealand to Bahá'ís of New Zealand, 16 December, 1996.
- ²⁴ *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 162
- ²⁵ *Star of the West*, vol. 13 (1922), pp. 20-22; *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 429-38 (esp. p. 431); Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 4 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987), p. 211
- ²⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqí'at 1922-1948* (Tehran: Mu'assih Millí Matbú'át Amrí, 130 B.E./1973), p. 13
- ²⁷ Adib Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, p. 295
- ²⁸ *Ma'idih Asmani* (9 vols., Tehran: Mu'assih Millí Matbú'át Amrí. 121-129 B.E./1964-1972), vol. 6, p. 64; *Tawqí'at 1927-1939* (Tehran: Mu'assih Millí Matbú'át Amri. 129 B.E./1972), p. 186
- ²⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqí'at 1927-1939*, p. 188; cf. Bahá'u'lláh quoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 430
- ³⁰ Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Book of Certitude* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 15
- ³¹ *Tawqí'at 1927-1939*, p. 188
- ³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 210
- ³³ Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated 23 March 1975, to an individual; in *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities* (Wilmette, IL: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1968), section 5.14; see bahai-library.com/?file=nsa_developing_distinctive_communities.html&chapter=1#5.1 (accessed 4 September 2008).
- ³⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria* (2 vols., Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982), vol. 1, p. 134