

Relativism, A Theological and Cognitive Basis for Bahá'í Ideas about God and the Spiritual World

Moojan Momen

The essence and the fundamentals of philosophy have emanated from the Prophets. That the people differ concerning the inner meanings and mysteries thereof is to be attributed to the divergence of their views and minds.

The Tablet of Wisdom

In *Lights of 'Irfan*, vol. 9 (2008), Ian Kluge has published a response to my earlier paper "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."¹ I would like to thank him for a clear and informative description of the background and the various elements that go towards relativism. From the start of this response, I would like to make it clear that I have never regarded my paper as a definitive exposition of Bahá'í theology or philosophy. I recognize that future Bahá'í scholars will develop understandings of the Bahá'í teachings that will make what I have written seem naive, ill-judged or simply wrong. At such an early stage in the development of the Bahá'í Faith, it would be foolish to imagine that we can make definitive statements when so much of the Bahá'í scriptures remain unpublished and inaccessible. Indeed since the publication of that first paper, I have modified my position as described below.

According to the Bahá'í view of where we are in humanity's development, Bahá'u'lláh has not come merely as a further Manifestation

of God, he is a Universal Manifestation coming at the close of one cycle and the start of another cycle. To me this means that what he has brought is so revolutionary that the new world that will come into being will be unrecognisable to the people of the past or present generation. When people in several thousand years time look at the process he has initiated, they will see it as the building of an entirely new world psychologically, socially, economically and, yes, even philosophically; in other words, that the cessation of war and creation of a peaceful united world will just be the surface effect of a much more radical change that has occurred in human minds and souls; that he has not just come to bring about world unity but to construct a new vision of reality itself.

I would maintain therefore that Bahá'u'lláh is not a proponent of Enlightenment philosophy who wishes to extend the liberal democratic values of the West to the rest of the world as some have suggested; he has not come to tinker at the edges of philosophy; he is not merely seeking to put right a few problems with the way the world is organized economically and socially; he has not come just to add a new international layer to the local and national institutions that we already possess. His aim is a radical change much more radical than any envisaged by any of the philosophies of the past. Unfortunately the word "radical" has been used of such political movements as communism and thus to call Bahá'u'lláh "radical" appears to put him into a category with the likes of Marx, but what Bahá'u'lláh aims at is something much deeper than anything that Marx wanted to achieve. The only effect of the Communist revolution was to replace one hierarchical oppressive social structure with another one (cf Orwell's *Animal Farm*). What Bahá'u'lláh is seeking to change is the very structure of society that has been the norm for some 7,000 years. This change can only be effected on the basis of changes in politics, economy, social structures and also in our conceptual and philosophical models. This change, the Bahá'í teachings maintain cannot be brought about by legislation and social policy. It also requires individuals who

are spiritually transformed so as to be less self-centred and more other-centred; and it requires social processes at a community level that can replace the present hierarchical social processes.

My critique of Kluge's response has four main points, which I will discuss in turn:

1. Along with others who have criticised my article on relativism, I feel that Kluge has simply taken the word "relativism" and reproduced all of the usual criticisms of this philosophical concept without taking into account that I have in fact used the word in a very limited way and in relation to a limited area of Bahá'í teachings. Thus most of what he writes in his article may well be true but is simply not relevant to my article.
2. Kluge has not taken into account the fact that this article was written some 30 years ago and published more than 20 years ago and that I have modified my position since then. Following the publication of my original article, Keven Brown pointed out to me an un-translated passage in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha which indicates that the metaphysical relativism in the Bahá'í scriptures applies at the level of the Prime Intellect (Primal Will or Primal Manifestation) and that nothing at all can be said about the level of the Absolute Reality of the Divinity Itself. Subsequently I modified my view and published this in my article "The God of Bahá'u'lláh",² a paper which Kluge appears not to have read.
3. In both articles, I have constructed an argument drawing conclusions from three quotations of Bahá'u'lláh and a quotation from 'Abdu'l-Baha. Kluge has not engaged with the argument that I have presented nor addressed any of

these quotations and has merely commented on a quotation from Shoghi Effendi that I appended as supporting evidence. It seems to me that if he is going to refute my paper, he should at least point out where the interpretation of the Bahá'í scripture that I have presented is faulty.

4. Point 3 in fact highlights a much more fundamental problem that I tackle at the end of this article—that the debate itself is evidence of my point. Since this is in many ways the crux of the matter, I would suggest that those who do not want to get buried in the details of my responses to the points that Kluge makes should just go to this last section (“4. The Relativism of the Debate”).

1: Relativism and relativism

Kluge has given a very extensive description of relativism in its widest scope of meaning. In my article, it may be that I was not sufficiently clear or emphatic but I did state there that I have confined my argument to a specific area of relativism, cognitive relativism, and applied it to a limited area of Bahá'í teaching, that of metaphysics. Thus much of what Kluge writes about ontological relativism (p. 187), moral relativism (p. 184), cultural relativism (p. 181, 186–7), legal relativism (p. 181, 187), etc., interesting as it may be, has no relevance to my article. Of course I do not think that the Bahá'í Faith advocates moral relativism. Bahá'u'lláh inculcates a moral code that by today's standards is even considered traditional or old-fashioned and is the very antithesis of moral relativism. Of course I do not think that the Bahá'í teachings advocate an ontological relativism (i.e. that the existence of all entities is context-dependent and determined by individual and/or cultural beliefs). Bahá'u'lláh clearly considers that there is an Absolute Reality which exists independently of every human point of view.

Relativism does not apply to most areas of the Bahá'í teachings, only to a limited area. In relation to ethics, Bahá'u'lláh restates the moral laws of previous religions (although there are changes in social ethics as these are part of the social teachings); in relation to social teachings, the Bahá'í scriptures advocate the principle of progressive revelation that the teachings brought by the Manifestations of God develop in accordance with human social progress. Paul Lample in his excellent treatment of the area of social action in the Bahá'í teachings, has suggested that the nonfoundationalism of Richard Bernstein is the best theoretical model for the Bahá'í teachings in the area of social action.³ It is only in the narrowly-defined area of metaphysics that I am suggesting that a cognitive relativism applies.

What I am suggesting is that the relativism that applies to the Bahá'í teachings relates to metaphysics and is cognitive. I am defining metaphysics as that which is beyond this physical world in other words, God and the spiritual world. Cognitive means that it applies, not to "what is" but to what we are capable of knowing about "what is". Thus my contention is that, although we believe that there is an Absolute Reality (God) in the metaphysical realm (the spiritual world beyond the physical), what we can know or comprehend about this entity that we call God is relative and not absolute. It is relative to our viewpoint, our psychological, spiritual, cultural and other limitations that confine our viewpoint and prevent us from comprehending the totality of God.

In explaining Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative", Kluge writes:

"From this we conclude that relativism does not apply to the "eternal verities" (universal, objective and foundational) but only to the way they may be expressed outwardly, or historically." (p. 209)

But my contention is that we human beings do not know what these “eternal verities” are in relation to metaphysics (and even in the area of ethics for the most part), we only have access to “the way they may be expressed outwardly, or historically”. Since we only have access to the historical expression of the “eternal verities”, then our knowledge of them is relative. This is true even in the area of ethics. Both the Bible and the Qur’an appear to consider slavery and holy war to be permissible yet Bahá’u’lláh now forbids these. Presumably the “eternal verities” have not changed and yet there has been a profound change in their historical expression. We however only have access to that historical expression. The same degree of change has occurred with many social structures and institutions such as the position of women in society and the position of the clerical class. For all we know there are aspects of our society that we regard as permissible and normal and fondly consider to be “eternal verities” which future Manifestations of God will change.

Of course when we are dealing with ethical relativism, we are treading on thin ice and it would be easy for some to take our words out of context and apply to them a meaning we did not intend (which is why I have not dwelt at any length on this aspect in my papers). The concept of ethical or moral relativism enshrined in the Bahá’í teaching is not one of “anything goes” in the present day which is what this term connotes to most people. Rather it is one that states that, over a long period of history, ethical ideals and values have changed as human society has changed and some of what was considered permissible in a past age is not considered permissible today.

Furthermore Kluge’s asserts that:

“Of course, it is evident that we do, in fact, have *some* knowledge of these “eternal verities” or other absolute truths... Thus, throughout history, we attain *partial glimpses* of the essential truths, the “eternal verities”. (p. 210)

I would ask the question: how do we know what are the “eternal verities” and what are those aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation that are not eternal and which future Manifestations of God will change? Perhaps if we had lived in the 12th century, we might have fondly imagined that the institution of slavery or holy war and those ethical values that underlie these practices were part of the “eternal verities”. Even today there are many who think that war is an “eternal verity” of the human condition. The teachings of future Manifestations of God are hidden from us precisely because we cannot “bear them now” (cf John 16:12). This in itself seems to me a convincing argument that we cannot know what the “eternal verities” are in any exhaustive or definitive sense in the area of ethics. We can only know them in the more general sense of spiritual qualities such as love, justice etc. In fact, the “*partial glimpses*” that Kluge refers to are precisely the cognitive relativism imposed on human beings (and indeed on all creatures) by the fact that they are incapable of comprehending the levels of reality above their own level.

Kluge has a section “Relativism versus Relationalism” deals with ontological questions whether things exist or do not - this again has nothing to do with the cognitive relativism that my two relativism papers are concerned with. However even in this section there are suggestive sentences that point to the position that I am suggesting. For example, Kluge states that:

Again we observe that in these statements the attributes of existence and nonexistence are not simply matters of opinion or viewpoint in the relativistic sense of our being able to hold the opposite view with equal validity. There is, for example, no standpoint from which creation is not contingent and dependent upon God, nor is there a standpoint from which God Himself depends on creation. (This should not be confused with the claim that humans may

devise various concepts of God; the concepts, but not God Himself are dependent on man.) (p. 214)

But as 'Abdu'l-Baha states all of our concepts of God are creations of our minds. He does not exclude the Bahá'ís from this statement:

Consider then, how all the peoples of the world are bowing the knee to a fancy of their own contriving, how they have created a creator within their own minds, and they call it the Fashioner of all that is—whereas in truth it is but an illusion. Thus are the people worshipping only an error of perception.⁴

All of us, whether Bahá'ís or not, cannot have any concepts of God that are independently true that occupy an Archimedean point. So the fact that God exists is an assertion that we affirm (i.e. a statement of belief) as soon as we try to conceptualise what “God exists” means (i.e. try to bring it to the level of cognition), we are in the realm of relative truths, each of us conceptualises that ontological truth in different ways in accordance with our worldview, our culture, our previous intellectual and social experiences.

But that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man. Never shall that immemorial Reality lodge within the compass of a contingent being. His is another realm, and of that realm no understanding can be won. No access can be gained thereto; all entry is forbidden there. The utmost one can say is that Its existence can be proved, but the conditions of Its existence are unknown.⁵

I cannot see that there is much difference between this concept of relative truth and the concept of perspectivism that Kluge approves of in his paper thus it may be that our difference in relation to this part of his paper is merely that of terminology.

Kluge writes that as a result of relativism:

...there is no common reality or world for all people. As seen immediately above, this leads to the impossibility of developing an even minimally coherent metaphysic theory of reality or general world-view (*Weltanschauung*). Even more, it also makes the entire Bahá'í project impossible. The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is to provide a spiritual framework in which all the religious dispensations can find their place and be elevated to a new level,⁶ and in which the dream of a unified world order can be achieved. Such unity requires that to a considerable degree we share a common reality, that at least a sufficient number of people agree about the nature of reality, the nature of man and the world we live in. (p. 224)

I would disagree profoundly with what Kluge has written here. It is the insistence on a single truth that has led the Western world towards its intellectual, religious and cultural imperialism in which it has insisted on its truth to the exclusion of all other perspectives. In reaction to this other groups such as Islamic fundamentalists are insisting that they have sole access to the truth. It is by allowing various viewpoints of the truth to co-exist within the Bahá'í framework, and thus giving dignity and value to these different frameworks, that we can have truly have unity on an equal basis and lessen the appeal of extremist positions.

2: At What Level Does Cognitive Relativism Apply?

Kluge takes up a great deal of his response in refuting the idea that the Bahá'í Faith believes in any form of monism (pp. 219–222). Firstly, I would like to say that everything that he writes is correct. He appears to think, however, that by refuting monism, he has refuted my thesis.

This shows a misunderstanding of my thesis. My articles are not saying that monism is the Bahá'í understanding of metaphysics. The position advanced in my articles is that both monism and theism are equally correct if they are taken as *an* understanding of God but they are equally incorrect if they are taken as *the* absolute understanding of God. Each understanding is correct from its own standpoint but wrong from the other standpoint. To be more specific, they are correct when understood at the level of the manifestation of the names and attributes of God but are incorrect as understandings of the Essence of God. This is an important point as much blood has been spilt over this difference in human history⁷ and resolving the conflict would therefore be a significant element in Bahá'í attempts to bring unity.

Both monists and theists regard their understandings as *the* absolute understanding of the Essence of God. By refuting this standard understanding of monism from the Bahá'í viewpoint, Kluge has in fact given half of the proof of my argument. To complete the proof of my position, I need only to refute the standard understanding of theism from a Bahá'í viewpoint and establish that these two positions are in fact both correct as relative understandings of the manifestations of the names and attributes of God (but not of God Himself). This I need to do in three stages:

- A. to refute, from a Bahá'í perspective, the standard understanding of theism;
- B. secondly to demonstrate that both theism and monism apply to the Manifestation of God only and not to the Essence; and
- C. to demonstrate that the Bahá'í scriptures advocate a cognitive relativism in order to explain how both theism and monism can apply to the Manifestation of God.

A. Refutation of Theism. Theism posits a God that can be known and described. Foremost among the statements made about God is that He is the Creator of all that exists. Many other attributes and actions are attributed to Him in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the Bahá'í scriptures, we find however that God is unknowable: "'The way is barred, and all seeking rejected.' The minds of the favourites of heaven, however high they soar, can never attain this station, how much less the understanding of obscured and limited minds."⁸ Even the attributes of God that we think we understand are, in reality, beyond our comprehension.

It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension.⁹

In the Bahá'í scriptures, however, we find evidence that these descriptions of God and His attributes refer not to the Essence of God but in fact all of them refer to the Manifestations of God. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that all pathways to the Ultimate Reality, whether that of mystics (*adh-dhákirún*) or of the learned (*al-`árifún*) are in reality pathways to the Manifestations of God—these two pathways can be considered as allusions to the two pathways of monism (the mystics) and theism (the learned). More specifically, Bahá'u'lláh denies that either the pathway of the mystic (*yadhkaraka*) or that of learning and esoteric knowledge (*ya`raja ilá hawá' `irfánika*) yields knowledge of Ultimate Reality; it yields knowledge only of the Manifestation:

The loftiest sentiments which the holiest of saints (*adh-dhákirún*) can express in praise of Thee (*yadhkaraka*), and the deepest wisdom which the most learned of men (*al-`árifún*) can utter in their attempts to comprehend Thy nature (*ya`raja ilá hawá' `irfánika*), all revolve around that Centre Which is wholly subjected to Thy sovereignty, Which adoreth Thy

Beauty, and is propelled through the movement of Thy Pen
[i.e. the Manifestation of God].¹⁰

Similarly, in his Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawh-i Basit al-Haqíqa), Bahá'u'lláh states that “whatever wondrous references and powerful descriptions have appeared from the mouth and pen refer to the sublime Word [of God], the most exalted Pen, the primal Summit, the true Homeland, and the Dawning-place of the manifestation of mercy [i.e. the Manifestation of God].”¹¹

Bahá'u'lláh states that he himself is the one whom in the Hebrew Bible is called Jehovah (Yahweh, YHWH)¹² and this is confirmed by Shoghi Effendi.¹³ Bahá'u'lláh also claims to be the Speaker on Sinai.¹⁴ Jehovah and the Speaker on Sinai are of course considered to have been God Himself in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh refers to Himself as the “Word” and as the “Father”,¹⁵ again being terms associated in the Christian Bible with God Himself. And similarly, the crowning attribute of God as the Creator is in fact, attributed in the Long Obligatory Prayer to the Manifestation of God: “He Who hath been manifested is the Hidden Mystery, the Treasured Symbol, through Whom the letters B and E (Be) have been joined and knit together.”

Bahá'u'lláh states that even such attributes as “Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence”, which we would normally think of only in relationship to the Ultimate Reality, are in fact attributable to the Manifestations of God.

Viewed from the standpoint of their oneness and sublime detachment, the attributes of Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence, have been, and are applicable to those Essences of Being, inasmuch as they all abide on the throne of Divine Revelation, and are established upon the seat of Divine Concealment. Through their appearance

the Revelation of God is made manifest, and by their countenance the Beauty of God is revealed. Thus it is that the accents of God Himself have been heard uttered by these Manifestations of the Divine Being.¹⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms this, asserting that everything that is attributed to God in the scriptures is in reality attributed to the Manifestation of God and that anything else that human beings may think they attribute to God is pure imagination.

Accordingly all these attributes, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation; and all that we imagine and suppose beside them is mere imagination, for we have no means of comprehending that which is invisible and inaccessible... From this it is certain and evident that if we imagine a Divine Reality outside of the Holy Manifestations, it is pure imagination, for there is no way to approach the Reality of Divinity which is not cut off to us, and all that we imagine is mere supposition.¹⁷

Even when we talk of the Oneness of God (*at-Tawhid*), we are in reality, so Bahá'u'lláh asserts, talking of the Unity of the Manifestations:

Beware, O believers in the Unity of God, lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between any of the Manifestations of His Cause, or to discriminate against the signs that have accompanied and proclaimed their Revelation. This indeed is the true meaning of Divine Unity, if ye be of them that apprehend and believe this truth.¹⁸

So the Bahá'í Faith, as well as refuting classical monism as Kluge demonstrates, also refutes classical theism, as laid out by the theologians of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

B. Both theism and monism apply to the Manifestation of God only and not to the Essence of God. As demonstrated in the previous section, all of these positions taken in the Bahá'í scriptures specifically and categorically deny the traditional theism of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Since the Bahá'í scriptures also specifically and categorically deny traditional monism, as Kluge has shown, what then are we left with? I would suggest that what we are left with is affirmation in the Bahá'í scriptures that both the theism and monism are true if applied to the Manifestation of the names and attributes of God. Thus for example, 'Abdu'l-Baha in *Some Answered Questions* denies a literal oneness of existence (*wahdat al-wujúd*) between the Creator and the creation, wherein God becomes resolved into (*munhall*, dispersed among) the forms of created things (as some Sufis and other monists assert). But of course both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Baha maintain that all things manifest at least some of the names and attributes of God. Thus names and attributes of God, the signs of God, are dispersed among all created things:

...whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.¹⁹

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, as the above quotations have demonstrated, that theism is also true at the level of the Manifestation of God

and not at the level of the Essence of God. Indeed the Bahá'í scriptures assert that we can say nothing about God. The only valid statement that we can say about God is that He/She/It exists, nothing else:

But that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man. Never shall that immemorial Reality lodge within the compass of a contingent being... The utmost one can say is that Its existence can be proved, but the conditions of Its existence are unknown.²⁰

We have seen above that the statements about God made in theistic traditions are related in the Bahá'í scriptures to the manifestation of God. The statements in Monism asserting unity between the individual and Absolute reality are also related by 'Abdu'l-Baha to the Manifestation of God, or rather to the Primal Will which is the Reality of the Manifestation of God. In describing the monist position, 'Abdu'l-Baha makes use of the analogy of the ocean as the Absolute Reality and of the waves of that ocean as the individual human beings. He asserts in *Some Answered Questions* that this position that the individual is emerges from and is absorbed back into the ocean of the Absolute Reality is wrong.²¹ 'Abdu'l-Baha explains however that between the World of the Absolute Reality and the physical world, there is an intermediate world, the World of Command (*'alam al-amr*), wherein the Primal Will emanates from God. This is the world of the Manifestation of God. He explains that "the Primal Will is the inner reality of all things and all existent entities are the manifestations of the Primal Will";²² and in another passage that the above concept of the waves that resolve into the ocean of Reality applies at this level of the Primal Will, the Manifestation of God.²³

In this way, both the theistic concept of God (and humanity's absolute separation and distinction from God) and the monistic concept

of the Absolute Reality (and humanity being resolved into and being inseparable from this Reality) are related in the Bahá'í scriptures to the concept of the Manifestation of God, who is in fact the Manifestation of the Primal Will and exists at the intermediary level of the World of Command.

C. The Bahá'í scriptures advocate a cognitive relativism in order to explain how both theism and monism can apply to the Manifestation of God. In my paper "The God of Bahá'u'lláh", I suggest that Bahá'u'lláh has tackled this split between theism and monism in five different ways, each of which is in its own right correct. This, incidentally, is itself a response to Kluge's contention (p.202) that the statement that Relativism is a basis for Bahá'í metaphysics is self-refuting, since it can only be relatively true. Yes, relativism is itself only relatively true; there are four other ways of looking at this question that are also relatively true. In this paper however, rather than repeating what is said in my other paper about the other four, I will just concentrate on relativism.

In the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality, Bahá'u'lláh describes the Manifestation of God thus: "even though outwardly He is given a name and appears to be bound by limitations, He is, in His inner reality, uncompounded (*basít*), sanctified from limitations. This uncompounded state is relative and attributive (*idáfi wa nisbi*) and not uncompounded in an absolute sense (*min kull al-jihát*)."²⁴

The Manifestation of God is humanity's contact or link with the Absolute. He has a privileged, Archimedean standpoint and is thus able to make pronouncements that are normative for all of humankind. But he is limited in what he can bring to us of Absolute Reality. He is confined by the limitations of human understanding, of human language and of the stage of development that humanity has reached. Thus although in theory, he could bring us Absolute Truth and "eternal verities", in practice he only brings us a truth that is compatible

with and relative to human limitations and our stage of development. The best that we as human beings can do is to study the scriptures that the Manifestation brings and form our own understandings of God and of the spiritual world. Of course this means that once one of the Manifestations of God, such as Moses and Muhammad, had made a strong statement against idolatry, it would no longer have been correct for Jewish and Islamic theologians and philosophers to have viewed spiritual reality in a way that included multiple gods. Similarly, since in the Bahá'í scriptures, there is a strong statement that reincarnation is not literally true, it would be wrong for Bahá'ís to construct theologies and philosophies that include this concept (although the Bahá'í scriptures do give us hints that such concepts might have some relative truth to them²⁵).

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Baha have removed God out of our arena of discourse completely and assert that all references either to a theistic God or a monistic Absolute Reality are in fact references to the Manifestation of God. How then can we reconcile the idea that both theism and monism are true at the level of the Manifestation of God? The Bahá'í scriptures themselves indicate the way. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that any conceptions that human beings have of God are in reality the products of their own mind; that human beings are unable to:

...fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render *are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations.*²⁶

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence. For whatever

such strivings may accomplish, *they can never hope to transcend the limitations imposed upon Thy creatures...*²⁷

Since human minds are incapable of transcending these limitations and conceptualising the Absolute Reality, Bahá'u'lláh states that the concepts that human beings have are thus necessarily a reflection of the viewpoint of that person:

The meditations of the profoundest thinker, the devotions of the holiest of saints, the highest expressions of praise from either human pen or tongue, are but *a reflection of that which hath been created within themselves...*²⁸

Similarly as we have seen above, 'Abdu'l-Baha says that:

All the people have formed a god in the world of thought, and that form of their imagination they worship...

Therefore consider: All the sects and people worship their own thought; they create a god in their own minds and acknowledge him to be the creator of all things, when that form is a superstition thus people adore and worship imagination.²⁹

'Abdu'l-Baha explains this further in his Commentary on the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure... ". Here in explaining the differences between those philosopher-mystics who incline to monism and those who incline to theism, 'Abdu'l-Baha asserts that these differences in the viewpoints arise from differences in the fundamental natures (i.e., the Divine attributes predominant within the soul/psyche complex) of the observers. The fundamental nature of one individual inclines him to see Reality in a dualist mode, while another will see Reality in a monist mode (see below for a more detailed explanation of this point).³⁰

In summary then, both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Baha are saying that the differences that occur between those who see God in a theistic mode and those who are inclined to seeing the Absolute Reality in a monistic mode are due to the viewpoint of these different observers; in other words that this is a matter of cognitive relativism. What they understand of the Absolute is relative to their viewpoint.

To express all of this in the language of post-modernism and deconstruction, we can say that the Bahá'í scriptures indicate that when scripture (whether Bahá'í or those of other religions) refers to God, the signifier "God cannot refer to an Absolute Entity, since there is nothing that can be said about that Absolute Reality. Instead, what is signified by the word "God" is that which is manifest of God in this world. At the highest level this is of course the Manifestation of God who is the perfect manifestation of all of the Names and Attributes of God, but the Names and Attributes of God are also manifest in every human being and even in Nature. In exactly the same way, the person hearing or reading the word "God" in the scripture will impose upon that a meaning drawn from a network of meanings in the person's mind and the culture in which the word is used. Thus ultimately the meaning of the word "God" rests upon a network of texts that form the background of the psyche and culture of the person using the word. We as human beings are inescapably caught within this web or net of meaning, to which the term "intertextuality" is applied. The "signifier" (which is usually a word, but may be an image, sound or action, invested with meaning) can truly represent the "signified" for a given individual person, but not generically for all.³¹

3: What is to count as proof and evidence?

In the two articles that I have written on this subject, I have constructed my arguments drawing conclusions from three quotations of Bahá'u'lláh and a quotation from 'Abdu'l-Baha. Kluge has not

engaged with the argument that I have presented nor addressed any of these quotations and has merely commented on a quotation from Shoghi Effendi that I appended as supporting evidence. It seems to me that if he is going to refute my paper, he should at least point out where the interpretation of the Bahá'í scripture that I have presented is faulty.

What Kluge has done in arguing against the conclusions of my paper is to bring forward logical and philosophical arguments. He appeals to the rational. He takes up much of his article with trying to prove that the position of relativism is “self-undermining and self refuting” and “logically incompatible” with the Bahá'í teachings (p. 180, 202; see pp. 204–211).

This appeal to logic and to rationalism is where I must part company with Kluge. Indeed in my first paper I made it clear that I realize that the position that I am putting forward may appear contrary to Aristotelean standards of logic. But I would contend that these Aristotelean standards are themselves not tenable when we are considering matters that relate to anything outside our every-day physical world. Even in science, it has become clear that Aristotelean logic and the construction of reality based on Newton's laws applies only to our every-day level of physical existence. As we move away from this, either towards the very small, where quantum theory appears to be the best explanation of reality, or towards the very large, where relativity theory appears to be the best explanation of reality, our common-sense and logical constructions (such as maintaining that a proposition and its opposite expression cannot both be true—Aristotle's Law of the Excluded Middle) become less and less “true”. Even Aristotle's laws of causality are called into question by 20th century science. The Newtonian construction of reality falls down and is replaced by a reality in which propositions and their opposites can both be true; in which a thing can be in two opposite states at once. If this is true in the realm of science as we move away

from the every-day physical world towards the very large and the very small in the physical world, I would maintain that it is also true as we move away from our everyday level of physical reality towards spiritual reality. Here too, as mystics have been saying for centuries, the laws of logic and our common-sense construction of reality break down. As Bahá'u'lláh writes in the Seven Valleys:

The story is told of a mystic knower, who went on a journey with a learned grammarian as his companion. They came to the shore of the Sea of Grandeur. The knower straightway flung himself into the waves, but the grammarian stood lost in his reasonings, which were as words that are written on water. The knower called out to him, "Why dost thou not follow?" The grammarian answered, "O Brother, I dare not advance. I must needs go back again." Then the knower cried, "Forget what thou didst read in the books of Sibavayh and Qawlavayh, of Ibn-i-Hajib and Ibn-i-Malik, and cross the water."

The death of self is needed here, not rhetoric:

Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves.³²

Kluge rejects the epistemological position of relativism that says "man, not the object of knowledge, determines what is true or false about what is perceived . . . Ontologically, it is man who determines whether something or some situation or state of affairs is or is not." (p. 189) But I would ask whether the following quotation from 'Abdu'l-Baha is not in fact an expression in relation to God of the position that Kluge has rejected: "All the people have formed a god in the world of thought, and that form of their imagination they worship."³³ As I have commented above, 'Abdu'l-Baha does not exclude Bahá'ís from this. "All the people", he says, determine for themselves what they consider to be "true or false".

Again Kluge rejects the relativist position that “you and I have different truths simply because we are different individuals with different points of view.” (p. 190) But I would ask: is this not the clear implication of ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s exposition of the Islamic Tradition “I was a Hidden Treasure...”. In this exposition, ‘Abdu’l-Baha explains that human beings do see reality differently because the various names and attributes of God are manifested in each individual to different degrees:

For the world of humanity is the world of the perfection of the words. Thus it is that it has been said: “God created Adam in His image”; that is to say in the form of His Names and Attributes. However although he is the dawning-place of the manifestation of all the Names and Attributes, one of the Divine Names is manifested most strongly and appears most intensely [in each person]. Thus his being originates from this Name and returns to it. The summary of the matter is that some of the saints of God, since they have seen the rays of the light of the Eternal Beauty with the eye of perpetuity in the heights of transcendence [*tanzih*] and the heaven of sanctity [*taqdis*] praise and sanctify the Essence of Absolute Unity above all of the stages [*shu’unat*] that pertain to the world. For in the being of these heavenly figures, the Names of “Sanctity” and “Transcendence” have shone forth. And some of the knowers of the Hidden Secrets are the manifestations of the names “Divinity” and “Lordship”. Thus it is that in this station, they do not see the Lord of Lords without His subject creatures, nor the Creator without a Creation, nor the All-Knowing without an object of knowledge.

And some of those who know the secrets of Primal Unity, although in their reality and innermost being one of the Divine Names is strongest yet in their being a reflection

exists and a light is apparent of every Name of the Absolute and every Attribute of the Self-Sufficient One. For these, in the station of absolute transcendence and complete sanctity whereof it is said: "There was God and there was nothing besides Him", see that Essence of Primal Unity as being pre-existent in both Essence and Attributes, free from the existence of objects of knowledge and from the realities of existent beings. In this station, they consider all except God to be absolute non-existence and complete nothingness. Thus it is that, in this station, they regard realities, existent beings and contingent beings as originated and do not consider anything as pre-existent except the Essence of the Absolute. In another station which is the station of the manifestation of the Name "All-Knowing" and the Names of "Divinity" and "Lordship", the realities of things are considered to be pre-existent and knowledge dependent on objects of knowledge.³⁴

Thus each individual sees reality differently in accordance with how strongly each of the names of God is manifested within him or her. For human beings, there is no Archimedean point for seeing reality correctly in any absolute way. All that is available are the individual understandings that each human being has. These understandings should of course be based on our reading of the scriptures but ultimately even our understanding of what we read is shaped by the factors which 'Abdu'l-Baha describes as the relative balance of the expression of the different Names of God in each individual.

Some in whom "the Names of 'Sanctity' and 'Transcendence' have shone forth" are more inclined to separate God from His creation, to separate truth from error; theirs is an analytic mind that seeks to separate and define precisely, a mind that does not tolerate ambiguity and contradiction. They favour reductive, empiricist, determinist or positivist approaches to constructing reality. This

frame of mind is favoured in the world of Newtonian science and Aristotlean philosophy.

Others whom 'Abdu'l-Baha describes as "the manifestations of the names 'Divinity' and 'Lordship'" are more inclined to see God in relation to His creation; they look to truths that encompass all positions and are more comfortable with ambiguity and contradictions, considering these to be an inherent, inescapable part of the human condition. They prize inclusiveness and synthetic, integrative or holistic constructions of reality. This frame of mind is favoured among mystics and many modern scientists.

Since this relative balance in the expression of the different Names of God in each individual affects how we see reality, it will also affect how we assess and determine what proofs and what evidence we accept in this debate. Those in whom 'Abdu'l-Baha says "the Names of 'Sanctity' and 'Transcendence' have shone forth" will be more strongly inclined to accept logical proofs and rational argumentation. Others whom 'Abdu'l-Baha says are "the manifestations of the names 'Divinity' and 'Lordship'" will prize argumentation that is holistic and inclusive. Thus the fact that Kluge sees Absolute Reality in a dualist form and I see it in a relativist mode indicates nothing at all about the Absolute Reality but does indicate something about the difference in our two psyches. Perhaps this then is the "knowledge" of our "own selves" that Bahá'u'lláh is referring to in his statement:

Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can affirm of Thee, or attribute unto Thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.³⁵

4: The Relativism of the Debate

Finally, I would like to make a more general point about what is going on in this debate, a point that is in many ways much more important than any specific detailed comments. If we look at Kluge's response we find the following points within it:

It is philosophical, and deals with truth as defined within a particular sphere of philosophy that favours logical, analytical argument. It has not responded to any of the quotations that I have given in my argument.

Similarly, if you examine my line of argument you will find that:

It is based on scripture and is principally theological in its argument. It deals with truth in a holistic and synthetic manner. Kluge will no doubt think that it has not dealt adequately with the specifically philosophical points in his argument.

What we have here then are two different conceptual worlds each perfectly self-consistent and understandable within itself but coming to different conclusions, using different criteria for what will count as evidence and what will count as decisive proof. In other worlds we have two universes of discourse, two paradigms, two realities or, to use a phrase from the philosopher Wittgenstein, two different language games.

Each universe of discourse is complete within itself and each seems consistent with reality and with the Bahá'í scriptures as long as one remains within it. While reading Kluge's paper all of his arguments are perfectly consistent and convincing. I would hope that the reader finds that my arguments are also consistent and convincing.

This picture that I have drawn of what his happening in the debate between myself and Kluge is in a way a much more powerful argument for the truth of the position of relativism than any of the detailed arguments I have made above. It demonstrates the reality of the human position. We are all trapped inside realities that we human beings have created communally, in this case, one a reality created within the world of philosophy and another created within a more theological setting. Although these realities are created by us, we lose sight of this fact and think of them as reality itself. We think that this is how things actually are whereas in fact they are just the reality that we have constructed. As long as we remain within one reality, the picture that it draws is consistent and believable. We, as human beings, have no way of standing outside of these constructions of reality and judging what is absolute truth. We only have access to our visions of truth that are limited and contingent.

Conclusion

In brief then, the position that I think is closest to what the Bahá'í scriptures say is one that is built up along the following lines:

1. Human beings because of the limited nature of their minds can have no knowledge of the Absolute Reality, God (no "Archimedean point" for understanding). The most we can say is an affirmation of belief that He/She/It exists. This inability of human minds to have knowledge of God extends to the rest of the metaphysical realm, since Bahá'ú'lláh asserts that we cannot even have knowledge of that aspect of the metaphysical realm that is closest to us, our own souls.
2. All that human beings have knowledge of are the Names and Attributes of God.

3. These Names and Attributes are most perfectly manifested in the Manifestations of God, the founders of the world religions, They are humanity's point of contact with the Absolute. They have a privileged, Archimedean standpoint, Therefore it is to the person and writings of these Manifestations that we must turn to obtain the best knowledge.
4. But we, as human beings are two stages away from being able to understand that Archimedean point. The first stage of remove is that, although the Manifestation has access to the Absolute Truth, He is limited in what He can bring to us of Absolute Reality. He is confined by the limitations of human understanding, of human language and of the stage of development that humanity has reached. Thus although in theory, He could bring us Absolute Truth, in practice he only brings us a truth that is compatible with and relative to human limitations and our stage of development. And so although He is able to make pronouncements that are normative for all of humankind, these are not statements of Absolute Truth but statements that are what we are able to understand of that truth at our stage of development.
5. The second stage of remove from Absolute Truth is that we, as human beings have no direct access to the mind of the Manifestation; we can only study the scriptures that the Manifestation brings and form our own understandings of God and of the spiritual world. But these understandings will be shaped by the limitations imposed upon us by our individual cultural and educational background and our own personal life history. They will be limited, partial or relative truths. Others from a different culture and life history will understand what they read in the same scriptures differently and will form their own understandings

of God, His attributes and of the spiritual world. The teachings of the Manifestation do give certain social and moral teachings and laws. Humanity must act on these as though they are absolutes until the coming of a future Manifestation of God, but in fact even these are relative truths and a future Manifestation may change these in ways that we cannot anticipate. Only a Manifestation of God, however, has the authority to change these social and moral laws and teachings or to interpret them in anything other than their obvious sense.

I would maintain that the pathway taken by Kluge is the one that Western thought has always traditionally taken and which necessarily results in one approach being triumphant over all other approaches. In this line of thought, there can only be one correct exposition of truth and only one understanding of reality. One result of this approach historically has been the neo-colonialism that seeks to impose one conceptual world (that of the West that is based on these philosophical concepts) on the rest of the world. The approach that I am suggesting in this paper enables Bahá'ís to explore the truths within the Bahá'í Faith from many different perspectives without prejudging what is the correct understanding of the Bahá'í scriptures. Humanity has a rich history of spiritual traditions stretching back thousands of years. Over time, these traditions have developed different ways of looking at the world. The approach that I am putting forward here enables Bahá'ís to explore this rich spiritual history and see what light these different approaches throw on the Bahá'í scriptures and what is in them about God and the spiritual world (the realm of metaphysics). The Bahá'í scriptures are full of gems but, I would maintain, that we will not succeed in discovering all of those gems if we restrict ourselves to looking with just the conceptual world of the Western philosophical tradition. We need to harness all of the world's spiritual and philosophical traditions if we are to succeed in finding all of these gems.

NOTES

- 1 In M. Momen (ed.), *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*, (Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, vol. 5, Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988), pp. 185–217
- 2 In M. Momen (ed.) *The Bahá'í Faith and World's Religions* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2003) 1–38
- 3 Paul Lample, *Revelation and Social Action* (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra, 2009), pp. 170–74. In this book, Lample broadly support the concept of cognitive relativism for metaphysics, pp. 177–8.
- 4 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), pp. 53–4. Cf older translation at 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Japan Will Turn Ablaze* (Japan: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 15 and *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2nd ed. 1976), pp. 381–2.
- 5 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 54. An alternative translation of this passage may be found in 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Japan Will Turn Ablaze*, p. 15–16 and *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2nd ed. 1976), pp. 381–2.
- 6 “Verily I say, in this most mighty Revelation, all the Dispensations of the past have attained their highest, their final consummation.” *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), no. 161, p. 340.
- 7 See Momen, *Understanding Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p. 41
- 8 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i Íqán* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989), p. 141
- 9 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 148; see also *Some Answered Questions*, p.221, and Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 1, pp. 3–4
- 10 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 1, pp. 4-5
- 11 Provisional translation by the present author. The original text for these translated passages can found in *Alváh-i Mubarakih Hadrat Bahá'u'lláh: Iqtidárát wa chand lawh digár* (reprint of Bombay 1310 AH./1892-3, no place of publication: no publisher, no date), pp. 108–9

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- 12 See Translation of two passages from the writings of Baha'u'llah in Lambden, *Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture* in M. Momen (ed.), *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*, (Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, vol. 5, Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988, pp. 65–183), p. 157–8.
- 13 Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1955) p. 104
- 14 See for example Súriy-i Haykal, para 133, in *Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002), p. 68
- 15 Súriy-i Haykal, para 112, 113, in *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 59.
- 16 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 177-8
- 17 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 149. There is also 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement: 'no one hath any access to the Invisible Essence. The way is barred and the road is impassable. In this world all men must turn their faces toward "Him-whom God-shall-Manifest." He is the "Dawning-place of Divinity" and the "Manifestation of Deity." He is the "Ultimate Goal," the "Adored One" of all and the "Worshipped One" of all. Otherwise, whatever flashes through the mind is not that Essence of essences and the Reality of realities; nay, rather it is pure imagination woven by man and is surrounded, not the surrounding. Consequently, it returns finally to the realm of suppositions and conjectures.' (*Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 3, New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930, p. 485)
- 18 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 24, p. 59.
- 19 Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), no. 176, pp. 271-2
- 20 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 54. An alternative translation of this passage may be found in 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Japan Will Turn Ablaze*, pp. 15–16 and *Bahá'í World Faith*, pp. 381–2.
- 21 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 290, 295–6
- 22 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátíb-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, (vols. 1–3 Cairo, 1910–22), vol. 3, p. 356
- 23 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátíb*, vol. 2, p. 141
- 24 Provisional translation by the present author. The original text for these translated passages can be found in *Alváb-i Mubarakih Hadrat Bahá'u'lláh: Iqtidárát wa chand lawh digár*, pp. 108–9

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- 25 See 'Abdu'l-Baha's discussion of reincarnation in *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 282–89.
- 26 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 83, pp. 165–6 (italics added).
- 27 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 1, pp. 3–5; cf. No. 19, pp. 46–7 (italics added).
- 28 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 148, pp. 317–8 (italics added).
- 29 I have preferred to use an older translation at 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Japan Will Turn Ablaze* (Japan: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 15 and and *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2nd ed. 1976), pp. 381–2, rather than the more recent translation at 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), pp. 53–4, because the older translation better conveys the sense that the opening phrase (*in khalq jamí'an*) refers to all people. The more recent translation reads: "This people, all of them, have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image which they have made for themselves... Consider then, how all the peoples of the world are bowing the knee to a fancy of their own contriving, how they have created a creator within their own minds, and they call it the Fashioner of all that is—whereas in truth it is but an illusion. Thus are the people worshipping only an error of perception."
- 30 On this work of 'Abdu'l-Baha, see Moojan Momen, "'Abdu'l-Baha's Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was A Hidden Treasure ...'(A Provisional Translation)," *Bulletin of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1985), pp. 4–64; also available at <http://www.northhill.demon.co.uk/relstud/kkm.htm>
- 31 For an analysis of a Bahá'í or rather Babi, text from this viewpoint, see Vahid Brown, Textual Resurrection: Book, Imam and Cosmos in the Qur'an Commentary of the Bab, *Baha'i Studies Review*, vol. 12 (2005) 59–73
- 32 Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp. 51-2
- 33 *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 381.
- 34 See note 30
- 35 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 1, pp. 4–5