Hagiography:

The Art of Setting Inspirational Examples for a Religious Community

Iscander Micael Tinto

"... to consign to history a drop of brightness, of humanity, of truth."

Smisurata preghiera, Fabrizio de André

Abstract

Hagiography (the study of the lives of the saints) is a literary genre that originated as a way of proposing to a largely illiterate audience inspirational life histories worthy of emulation.

This paper will present a brief comparison between the foremost example of Muslim hagiography (Aṭṭár's *Tadhkirat al-Auliya'*) and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Memorials of the Faithful* by citing two biographies from Aṭṭár's work (Rábi'ah Al-'Adawiyya and Shaykh Báyazid al-Bistámí) and two from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's book (Mishkín Qalam, and Shams-i-Duhá), to show how hagiography highlights concrete examples of desirable spiritual virtues.

Hagiography is defined as the writing and critical study of the lives of the saints. This genre of literature first originated in the Roman Empire as stories and legends about Christian martyrs were collected and later presented in a written form.

The dates of their deaths formed the basis of martyriologies. In the 4th century, there were three main types of catalogs of lives of the saints: the Menaion, or biographies of the saints to be read at sermons; the Synaxarion, a short collection of lives of the saints, arranged by date; the Paterikon, the biography of specific saints, chosen by the catalog compiler.

In Western Europe, during the Middle Ages, hagiography became one of the vehicles for the study of inspirational history and a pedagogical tool by which a Christian code of conduct could be taught to a largely uneducated and often illiterate population. The life of Christ was the benchmark against which saints were measured, and the lives of saints were the benchmark against which the general population measured itself. The stories offered clear patterns to emulate.

Hagiography was fundamental in developing the practice of veneration of saints that lay at the heart of the practice of late antique and medieval Christianity. Integral parts of this practice were the veneration of relics (from the Latin *reliquiae* or "remains": parts of a holy person's body or possessions, or simply objects might have come in contact with the saint) and icons (holy portraits of saints and prophets), and the commemoration of the day of the saint's death as a holy day. Prayers, offerings and pious acts performed on such holy days, or at the shrines that contained such relics and icons, the living Christian could seek the help of the saintly dead now residing in Heaven.

From another perspective, hagiography preserved much valuable information about religious beliefs, customs, daily life, institutions, and events over certain historical periods.

Islamic hagiographic literature presents two distinct genres, one concerning individuals of exclusive religious status ("saints" or "holy men") and one devoted to the biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Shi'ite Imams. The primary purpose of the 11th century works in the Sufi tradition appears to be the defense of mysticism and its adherents stressing that

the conduct and doctrines of eminent Sufis were in accordance with the texts of the Muslim revelation.

> The emergence of hagiographic works devoted exclusively to an individual Sufi shaikh[1] seems to correspond to a distinct change in mystical practice and its organizational structures; the authors were often descendants of the shaikhs themselves or one of their close companions.... Such biographies of individual shaikhs served to increase the inner cohesion of this social group and enhance its prestige with outsiders; in fact, their status and livelihood may have depended entirely on their lineage leading back to the shaikh. These works are made up typically of anecdotes that the final "authors" had evidently obtained from the oral tradition, which always remained an important source for hagiographers; once committed to writing, the anecdotes still continued to circulate orally, and while their (oral) narrators may have been conscious of a written tradition this did not prevent them from adapting the material to meet their present needs. Thus the "hagiographic process" could have proceeded from events witnessed by the saint's followers, to oral transmission, thence to written notes, eventually published as books, while the oral tradition was continually developing all the time....
>
> Hagiography can be seen as a technique for making events meaningful or, conversely, for expressing doctrines in the form of narratives, as a specific sub-genre of historiography. [Jürgen, "Hagiographic Literature"]

The main purpose of the hagiographer is "to transmit to a believing and pious audience matters of practical spiritual value; the specifically 'human'—the whole stuff of modern biography—is trivial and profoundly uninteresting from a traditional viewpoint" [Algar 134] which makes it extremely

difficult to extract an actual biography (in the modern sense, as Algar points out) of the saint from the information at hand.

> Hagiographic works reflect not only the development of Islamic mysticism in its organized form, but also that of popular piety. It can therefore serve as an important source for the study of the history of different levels of Islamic society. However, such literature has usually been considered only a minor source for the history of Islamic society and culture, being judged as less reliable than historiography narrowly defined. Its use has been restricted to the study of mysticism, where theological and philosophical issues have tended to be the focus of scholarly interest. In consequence, hagiography remains a relatively neglected area of study. ["Hagiographic Literature"]

A Comparison between *Tadhkirat al-Auliya'* (Memorial of the Saints) by Faríd al-Din Aṭṭár and *Tadhkiratu'l-Vafá* (Memorials of the Faithful) by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Faríd al-Din Aṭṭár

In the words of Arberry, who translated parts of the *Tadhkirat al-Auliya'*, "Faríd al-Din Aṭṭár is accounted amongst the greatest poets of Persia; his dimensions as a literary genius increase with the further investigation of his writings, which are still far from completely explored, though welcome progress has been made of late in their publication" [Arberry, "Introduction" 1].

Born circa 540 AH (1145-46 CE) at Nishapur (where he died in 618 AH/1221 CE) Aṭṭár was not only a poet but also a hagiographer and a theoretician of mysticism. While his

> works say little else about his life, they tell us that he practiced the profession of pharmacy and personally

> attended to a very large number of customers.... It seems that ʿAṭṭár was not well known as a poet in his own lifetime, except at Nisapúr.... From the second half of the 7th/13th century onward, ʿAṭṭár's prose work, the *Tadkerat al-awliáʾ*, came to be widely read... but his greatness as a mystic, a poet, and a master of narrative was not discovered until the 9th/15th century.... In regard to ʿAṭṭár's general education and culture, no adequate picture can be obtained from his writings. [Reinert]

Tadhkirat al-Auliya', Aṭṭár's only prose work,

> is a collection of biographies dedicated to exponents and pioneers of classical Sufism... The work gives a sort of hagiographic summary of his career in the ethical and experiential world of the Sufis (see above). It is to be regretted that he hardly ever names his sources. He appears to have relied almost entirely, if not exclusively, on written sources. In his choice and narration of edifying and memorable stories, he shows a distinctive taste of his own. Comparisons with versions of the same material in works by other authors suggest that he presented and interpreted the stories somewhat idiosyncratically.... On the other hand, he translated sayings of his Sufis, which had come down in Arabic, very faithfully into Persian. [Reinert]

Why did Aṭṭár write the *Tadhkirat al-Auliya'*? Islamist Arthur J. Arberry cites Reynold A. Nicholson (another translator of Aṭṭár's work) who summarizes as follows some of the possible reasons:

1. He was begged to do so by his religious brethren.
2. He hoped that some of those who read the work would bless the author and thus, possibly, secure his welfare beyond the grave.

3. He believes that the words of the Saints are profitable even to those who cannot put them into practice, inasmuch as they strengthen aspiration and destroy self-conceit.

....

5. According to the Prophet, "Mercy descends at the mention of the pious": peradventure, if one spreads a table on which Mercy falls like rain, he will not be turned away portion less.

6. Aṭṭár trusts that the blessed influence of the Saints may be vouchsafed to him and bring him into happiness before he dies.

7. He busied himself with their sayings in the hope that he might make himself to resemble them.

8. The Koran and the Traditions cannot be understood without knowledge of Arabic, wherefore most people are unable to profit by them; and the Sayings of the Saints, which form a commentary on the Koran and the Traditions, were likewise uttered, for the most part, in Arabic. Consequently the author has translated them into Persian, in order that they may become accessible to all.

....

10. Spiritual words alone appeal to the author. Hence he composed this "daily task" for his contemporaries, hoping to find some persons to share the meal which he has provided.

11. The Imam Yusuf Hamadhani advised some people, who asked him what they should do when the Saints had passed away from the earth, to read eight pages of their Sayings every day. Aṭṭár felt that it was incumbent upon him to supply this desideratum.

....

13. In the present age the best men are bad, and holy men have been forgotten. The Memorial is designed to remedy this state of things.

14. The Sayings of the Saints dispose men to renounce the world, meditate on the future life, love God, and set about preparing for their last journey. "One may say that there does not exist in all creation a better book than this, for their words are a commentary on the Koran and Traditions, which are the best of all words. Anyone who reads it properly will perceive what passion must have been in the souls of those men to bring forth such deeds and words as they have done and said."

15. A further motive was the hope of obtaining their intercession hereafter and of being pardoned, like the dog of the Seven Sleepers which, though it be all skin and bone, will nevertheless be admitted to Paradise. [xxv-xxviii]

'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Abbás Effendi, the eldest of three surviving children of Bahá'u'lláh and His wife Ásíyyih Khánum, was born in Tehran, Iran, on 23 May 1844, the day on which the Báb declared His mission in Shiraz. 'Abbás Effendi—who, after Bahá'u'lláh passed away, added to His given name the title 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the Servant of the Glory)—was named for His paternal grandfather, 'Abbás, known as Mírzá Buzurg Núrí, a member of a well established and distinguished family. Mírzá Buzurg had served the government in many capacities and was much admired for his accomplishments as a calligrapher and respected as a high government official....

Bahá'ís see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, as "the stainless Mirror" of Bahá'u'lláh's light, "the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá'í virtue." 'Abdu'l-Bahá is "the 'Mystery of God'—an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him,

> and which... indicates how in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.”
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> ... ‘Abdu’l-Bahá passed away in Haifa at the age of seventy-seven in the early hours of the morning on 28 November 1921. The funeral, held the next day and attended by thousands of mourners, was a spontaneous tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s person. [Kazemzadeh]

Professor of Islamic Studies Amín Banani writes:

> *Memorials of the Faithful*, which has only lately (1971) been translated into English, is a compendium of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s remembrances of some seventy early believers, spoken to gatherings of Bahá’ís in Haifa during the early years of World War I. These were compiled, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s permission for their publication was granted in 1915 but due to the strictures of wartime the book was not published until 1924 when it was again authorized by Shoghi Effendi.
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> The outward form of *Memorials of the Faithful* is a collection of brief biographical sketches. Its title in the original, *Tadhkiratu’l-Vafá*, places it in a Persian literary tradition some nine centuries old. It brings to mind the *Tadhkiratu’l-Awliyá* (Remembrance of Saints) of the twelfth century mystic poet ‘Aṭṭár. The spiritual and cultural impulses that have given rise to the literary form of tadhkirib have little to do with the particular, the personal and the ephemeral aspects of human life. It is the quality of soul, the attributes of spirit, the quintessential humanity and the reflection of the divine in man that is the focus here.
>
> The root word dhikr in the title means prayerful mention—reverent remembrance. It implies that it is not

the biographer nor the reader who memorializes a human life, but rather the quality of that life which has earned immemorial lustre and sheds light on all who remember that quality. Quite literally this book is a remembrance of *vafá*—faithfulness—not just memories of individual lives, but remembrance of that essential quality which was the animating force of all those lives.

The people whose "lives" are depicted here all share one thing in common. They are propelled by their love for Bahá'u'lláh. So great is this magnetic force in their lives that they literally travel vast distances and overcome every barrier to be with Him. Some of them arrive virtually with their dying breath, to expire happily after having seen the face of their Beloved; some die on the arduous path. Despite the peculiarities of time and place, it should not take the reader long to recognize a gallery of timeless and universal human types in this book.

The spoken language of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is figurative and almost indistinguishable from His written style. He makes use of a rich fund of literary devices—rhymed phrases, symmetrical forms, alliterations, assonances, metaphors, similes, and allusions—that, far from sounding contrived and artificial, are naturally matched to the subject matter: the essence of faithfulness. With concrete images He describes spiritual states and psychic levels of consciousness, as if to assert the primacy and reality of the realm of spirit. Should the reader experience difficulty with the style, let him savour it slowly, allowing the unfamiliar language to create its own spirit and breathe life into its allusions. Let the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá trace in his mind the shape of the valley of love and faithfulness.

> In His usual self-effacing way 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says almost nothing about Himself in this book. But occasional events in the lives of these companions are interwoven with His own. In these passages we have some thrilling glimpses of that essence of humanity and humility that was 'Abdu'l-Bahá. [Banani, 70-71]

The Four Saints Compared in this Paper

It is not easy to choose only four stories from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Aṭṭár's books, but I have decided to dwell on the following characters because their stories highlight divine intervention in each life. In these stories we can catch a glimpse of both humanity and eternity in the daily actions of the individuals, and in the simplicity with which they turn their hearts to their Creator in prayer and devotion. Just like any of us, these are people who wish to pray, yet can be distracted by the outward world and by inner voices; they are bound by the necessities of material life, yet they can be grateful for both adversity and prosperity, for the fruits of their labors and for Divine providence.

Studying the lives of the saints, we can be struck by the profound spirituality and detachment that characterize them. These qualities define their lives to the point that they become symbol and metaphor of our own constant endeavors toward new heights of comprehension that will open new vistas to our spiritual eyes, just the way climbing up a mountain expands our horizons and affords us, puny creatures, an unprecedented view of the valleys below.

The climb may be arduous and tiring but is the sure path to the goal of our aspirations: nearness to our Creator, the chance to reflect the splendour of His attributes in our person, a keen and crystalline vision of reality.

Rábi'ah

She was born into a poor but pious family, the fourth of four daughters. At the time of her birth her family was so desperately poor that there was no cloth in which to wrap her, no lamp to light the house, nor oil to anoint her navel. That night the Prophet appeared to Rábi'ah's father in a dream, comforting him with the news that his daughter was a "queen among women" who would be the intercessor for seventy thousand of the Prophet's community. After a number of years Rábi'ah's parents both died and she and her sisters became separated during a famine. She was seized by an evil man and sold as a slave for a small amount of money. Rábi'ah's master put her to hard labor. One day she was approached by a stranger. Afraid, she fled, but fell and broke her hand. She cried out to God, not to remove her sufferings, but to know if He was satisfied with her or not. Rábi'ah was answered by a voice which foretold of her high rank in the hereafter, and she was inspired to intensify her life of devotion. One night her master awoke and saw Rábi'ah absorbed in prayer with a holy light suspended in midair above her head. Her master was amazed and felt ashamed to keep someone of her spiritual rank as a slave. He freed her and she retired into the desert to devote her life to worship and seeking proximity to God.

It is around this basic outline that 'Aṭṭár weaves various anecdotes, sayings and supplications attributed to Rábi'ah in order to fashion and bring to life his image of this remarkable woman saint. 'Aṭṭár illustrates not only Rábi'ah's profound level of spiritual insight and attainment, but also her intense and frequently sharp-witted personality which together commanded the respect of all who encountered her. Although 'Aṭṭár emphasizes Rábi'ah's mystical dimension and particular spiritual characteristics, he does so within a context that

takes into account her relation to orthodox Islamic practice and the significance of her womanhood. [Helms, 14]

Rábi'ah in the Tadhkirat al-Auliya'

Aṭṭár wrote: if anyone says, "Why have you included Rábi'ah in the rank of men'" my answer is, that the Prophet himself said, "God does not regard your outward forms." The root of the matter is not form, but intention, as the Prophet said, "Mankind will be raised up according to their intentions."

One day Rábi'ah's servant girl was making an onion stew; for it was some days since they had cooked any food. Finding that she needed some onions, she said, "I will ask of next door." "Forty years now," Rábi'ah replied, "I have had a covenant with Almighty God not to ask for aught of any but He. Never mind the onions." Immediately a bird swooped down from the air with peeled onions in its beak and dropped them into the pan. "I am not sure this is not a trick," Rábi'ah commented. And she left the onion pulp alone, and ate nothing but bread.

One night Hasan with two or three friends went to visit Rábi'ah. Rábi'ah had no lantern. Their hearts yearned for light. Rábi'ah blew on her finger, and that night till dawn her finger shone like a lantern, and they sat in its radiance. If anyone says, "How could this be'" I answer, "The same as Moses' hand." If it is objected, "But Moses was a prophet," I reply, "Whoever follows in the footsteps of the Prophet can possess a grain of prophethood, as the Prophet says, 'Whoever rejects a farthing's worth of unlawful things has attained a degree of prophethood.' He also said, 'A true dream is one-fortieth part of prophethood.'" [Arberry 39]

Báyazid

Abú Yazid al-Bistámí, also known as Báyazid (d.874), was born in Bistám, a very important Iranian town of the Abbasid age (750-1258). One of the most celebrated Sufis, he is the first who pronounced those seemingly blasphemous utterances which imply the mystic's identification with God, such as: 'Glory be to me' or 'I am Thou' or 'I am I'. He may have escaped martyrdom, despite his audacious sayings, because he was thought to be crazy. Báyazid left no writings, but some five hundred of his sayings have been preserved by his biographers.

Bahá'u'lláh quotes in the Four Valleys words which have been ascribed to Báyazid:

> *Hence, one of the Prophets of God... hath asked: 'O my Lord, how shall we reach unto Thee And the answer came, 'Leave thyself behind, and then approach Me.'* [55]

Words very similar to these are ascribed to Abu Yazid by 'Aṭṭár in his Tadhkirat al-Awliyá. 'Aṭṭár writes that once Báyazid dreamt God Himself, Who told him: 'What do you wish, O Báyazid?' The Highest answered: 'Whatever is Thy wish, O God.' And God answered: 'O Báyazid! I want you, as you want Me.' Then Báyazid asked Him again: 'But which road is leading unto Thee?' And God answered: 'O Báyazid! Whoever renounces his own self will attain unto Me.' Ibn al-'Arabi himself ascribes these words to Báyazid in his Futúhát: "The Prophet... said to Abu Yazid, 'Leave aside yourself and come'" [IV. 306.20, quoted in Chittick, Self-Disclosure 180].

> ... If the words 'one of the Prophets of God'... refer to Báyazid, we may think that Bahá'u'lláh considered him as a spiritually advanced seeker. [Savi 514-15]

Báyazid in the *Tadhkirat al-Auliya'*

Pir Omar reports that when Abu Yazid wished to go into seclusion, in order to worship or to meditate, he would enter his apartment and secure closely every aperture. "I am afraid," he would say, "that some voice or some noise may disturb me." That of course was a pretext.

One night Abu Yazid could find no joy in worship. "Look and see if there is anything of value in the house," he said. His disciples looked, and discovered half a bunch of grapes. "Fetch them and give them away," Abu Yazid commanded. "My house is not a fruiterer's shop." And he rediscovered his composure.

One night Abu Yazid dreamed that the angels of the first heaven descended. "Rise up," they said to him, "let us commemorate God." "I have not the tongue to commemorate Him," he replied.

The angels of the second heaven descended and said the same words, and his answer was the same. So it continued till the angels of the seventh heaven descended; to them he gave the same reply.

"Well, when will you have the tongue to commemorate God'" they asked. "When the inhabitants of Hell are fixed in Hell, and the inhabitants of Paradise take their place in Paradise, and the resurrection is past, then," said he, "Abu Yazid will go around the throne of God and will cry Allah, Allah!" [Arberry 147]

Mishkín-Qalam

Mishkín-Qalam was born in Shíráz but was a resident of Iṣfahán, which is where he first heard of the Bahá'í Faith. A few years later he travelled to Baghdad and learned in more detail from Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín and Nabíl-i-

A'zam. He became a Bahá'í in Adrianople where he met Bahá'u'lláh. Before becoming a Bahá'í, he was a Súfí of the Ni'matu'lláhí order. He was also a skilled astronomer.

Mishkín-Qalam was sent by Bahá'u'lláh to Constantinople, where he began attracting people through his art and vigorously teaching the Bahá'í Faith. The Persian ambassador began to complain to the Sultan's vazirs and soon had him arrested. When Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to 'Akká, Mishkín-Qalam was exiled to Cyprus with the followers of Subh-i-Azal, where he remained a prisoner in Famagusta from 1868 to 1877.

Cyprus eventually left Ottoman control and Mishkín-Qalam was released. He made his way to 'Akká in 1886, and remained there until Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892, after which he travelled to Egypt, Damascus and India. He remained in India until 1905, and then returned to Haifa until his death in 1912.

Mishkín-Qalam was a renowned calligrapher. 'Abdu'l-Bahá called him a second Mír 'Imád, a 16th-century calligrapher of the Safavid dynasty who is perhaps the most celebrated Persian calligrapher.

Mishkín-Qalam enjoyed a special position among the court ministers of Tihrán, and he became widely known for being adept at every calligraphic style.

... When visiting Bahá'u'lláh in Adrianople, he would often write out the phrase Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá (O Glory of the All-Glorious) in many different forms, some taking the form of a bird, and send them everywhere. One of his renderings of this phrase is now one of the three common symbols of the Bahá'í Faith, known as the Greatest Name. [Wikipedia, "Mishkín-Qalam"]

Mishkín-Qalam in *Memorials of the Faithful*

He wielded a musk-black pen, and his brows shone with faith. He was among the most noted of mystics, and had a witty and subtle mind.

... This highly accomplished man first heard of the Cause of God in Iṣfahán, and the result was that he set out to find Bahá'u'lláh. He crossed the great distances, measured out the miles, climbing mountains, passing over deserts and over the sea, until at last he came to Adrianople. Here he reached the heights of faith and assurance; here he drank the wine of certitude. He responded to the summons of God, he attained the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, he ascended to that apogee where he was received and accepted.

... After the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, Mishkín-Qalam remained loyal, solidly established in the Covenant. He stood before the violators like a brandished sword. He would never go half way with them; he feared no one but God; not for a moment did he falter, nor ever fail in service.

... He had amazing verve, intense love. He was a compendium of perfections: believing, confident, serene, detached from the world, a peerless companion, a wit—and his character like a garden in full bloom. For the love of God, he left all good things behind; he closed his eyes to success, he wanted neither comfort nor rest, he sought no wealth, he wished only to be free from the defilement of the world.... For sincerity and loyalty he had no match, nor for patience and inner calm. He was selflessness itself, living on the breaths of the spirit. [MF 98–101]

Shams-i-Duhá

Mírzá Hádí, an uncle of the King of Martyrs and the Beloved of Martyrs, became an ardent believer in the early days of the Faith. He was present at the Conference of Badasht, suffered persecutions, was attacked in that vicinity and died there. His wife Shams-i-Duhá, a close companion of Táhirih, was described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the 'eloquent and ardent handmaid of God'. [Taherzadeh 16]

Khurshíd Begum, who was given the title of Shamsu'd-Duhá, the Morning Sun, was mother-in-law to the King of Martyrs. This eloquent, ardent handmaid of God was the cousin on her father's side of the famous Muḥammad-Báqir of Isfáhán, widely celebrated as chief of the 'ulamás in that city. When still a child she lost both her parents, and was reared by her grandmother in the home of that famed and learned mujtahid, and well trained in various branches of knowledge, in theology, sciences and the arts.

Once she was grown, she was married to Mírzá Hádíy-i-Nahrí. In Karbilá they attended some classes, imbibing the knowledge of the Siyyid, so that this handmaid became thoroughly informed on subjects relating to Divinity, on the Scriptures and on their inner meanings. The couple had two children, a girl and a boy. They called their son Siyyid 'Alí and their daughter Fátimih Begum, she being the one who, when she reached adolescence, was married to the King of Martyrs. [MF 180–81]

Shams-i-Duhá in Memorials of the Faithful

From being with Táhirih, Shams profited immeasurably, and was more on fire with the Faith than ever. She spent three years in close association with Táhirih in Karbilá.

As Táhirih became celebrated throughout Karbilá, and the Cause of His Supreme Holiness, the Báb, spread all over Persia, the latter-day 'ulamás arose to deny, to heap scorn upon, and to destroy it. They issued a fatvá or judgment that called for a general massacre. Táhirih was one of those designated by the evil 'ulamás of the city as an unbeliever, and they mistakenly thought her to be in the home of Shamsu'd-Duhá. They broke into Shams's house, hemmed her in, abused and vilified her, and inflicted grievous bodily harm. They dragged her out of the house and through the streets to the bázár; they beat her with clubs; they stoned her, they denounced her in foul language, repeatedly assaulting her. While this was going on, Ḥájí Siyyid Mihdí, the father of her distinguished husband, reached the scene. "This woman is not Táhirih!" he shouted at them. But he had no witness to prove it, and the farráshes, the police and the mob would not let up. Then, through the uproar, a voice screamed out: "They have arrested Qurratu'l-'Ayn!" At this, the people abandoned Shamsu'd-Duhá.

... She spent her days and nights in the remembrance of God and in teaching His Cause to the women of that city. She was gifted with an eloquent tongue; her utterance was wonderful to hear. She was highly honored by the leading women of Isfáhán, celebrated for piety, for godliness, and the purity of her life. She was chastity embodied; all her hours were spent in reciting Holy Writ, or expounding the Texts, or unraveling the most complex of spiritual themes, or spreading abroad the sweet savors of God.

... So vehement was the fiery love in her heart that it compelled her to speak out, whenever she found a listening ear. And when it was observed that once again the household of the King of Martyrs was about to be overtaken by calamities, and that they were enduring

> *severe afflictions there in Isfáhán, Bahá'u'lláh desired them to come to the Most Great Prison. Shamsu'd-Duhá, with the widow of the King of Martyrs and the children, arrived in the Holy Land. Here they were joyously spending their days when the son of the King of Martyrs, Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Husayn, as a result of the awful suffering he had been subjected to in Isfáhán, came down with tuberculosis and died in Akká.* [MF 182–90]

Conclusions

'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Aṭṭár's books differ in one aspect: the individuals portrayed by Aṭṭár have either performed miracles or great heroic acts; in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's work, instead, we meet both people who have distinguished themselves for their heroism and simple people who demonstrate in their daily existence the meaning of living a spiritual life. The reason these latter believers are an example for the reader is their very simplicity: true heroism is living one's life and being steadfast through the tests that give us the opportunity to grow spiritually. Spirituality is a conscious endeavor developed through prayer and meditation but also through the simple acts of daily life: dedication to one's profession, deeds that benefit our neighbor, constant control of our impulses, and fellowship and brotherhood with all people, while remaining confident and contented even during life's hardest times. "*The point is this, that faith compriseth both knowledge and the performance of good works.*" ['Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Research Department Memorandum to the Universal House of Justice]

While some may suffer persecution or even martyrdom because of their beliefs and demonstrate thusly their love for the Faith, for those of us living in countries that enjoy freedom of religion, remaining faithful to certain spiritual values in a society that rejects them is in itself an act of heroism—these two different sacrifices assume the same meaning. Martyrdom, in this case, consists of taking hold of our ego—our lower nature—

and, through constant effort, raise it to the noble station for which it is destined.

In the lives celebrated in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Memorials*, we can perceive an exhortation to rethinking the role of the individual in society. If we observe carefully, we will notice how the negative example of a single individual—a corrupt politician, for example, or an employee who is unable to work cooperatively in a group—can become a problem that affects the entire community. At the same time, we are impressed by virtuous individuals who demonstrate in their lives adherence to behaviors oriented toward fellowship to and respect for others, and we hold them up as examples to emulate. We feel a strong attraction for a time and space in which to develop our ideals and our values. The humble yet powerful lesson of the believers remembered in *Memorials* encourages personal discipline in every aspect of life, that by the dynamic force of our example, a healthier and more balanced society may come to life.

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Note

[1] In Islam, a sheikh is a man respected for his piety or religious learning.