

The Bedrock of Bahá’í Belief: The Doctrine of Progressive Revelation

Zaid Lundberg

The British medieval Christian theologian and churchman St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) said that “Theology” which utilizes doctrines is “faith seeking rational self-understanding.”¹ Nine centuries later, Alister McGrath similarly states that “Doctrine may...be regarded as the intellectual self-expression of a living tradition....”² These passages could be interpreted on the one hand that through colloquia and seminars like this one on Principles of the Bahá’í Belief System or Bahá’í Theology, we, as Bahá’ís, have the rare and precious opportunity to, ultimately, develop a greater self-understanding and self-expression of the Bahá’í Faith itself. Yet, on the other hand, it is significant that in 1992 Udo Schaefer stated that:

if we compare the development of the doctrines of our Faith, the scholarly systematization and presentation of its teachings in terms of philosophy, theology, religious studies, with that of Islam, for instance, we must admit that we are still in our infancy...our research has mainly been focused on the history of our Faith.... The theological doctrines...which are at the very core of a religion, have not been stressed much in [Bahá’í] research...and] very little has been written on the metaphysical and theological aspects of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.³

Jack McLean’s *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá’í Theology* (1997) may be seen as a recent and serious attempt, involving several Bahá’í “theologians,” to investigate the theological dimension of the Bahá’í Faith. Nonetheless, McLean writes in the same work that:

The systematic “Bahá’í theologian” has yet to emerge...and a number of fundamental Bahá’í teachings have suffered from neglect ...there is still no major scholarly work in Bahá’í perspective on this most vital theme [the oneness of religion],⁴ which along with the oneness of humanity, is the most distinctive and characteristically Bahá’í teaching. Neither is there yet any major scholarly work on *progressive revelation*, one of the grand themes of Bahá’u’lláh’s pre-eminent doctrinal work the Kitáb-i-Íqán.⁵

Doctrine, Belief, Theology, and Religion

In a Western and a Christian traditional sense, the study of doctrines has been recognized as being intimately related to theology, or theological systems, and have therefore often labeled “systematic theology” and “dogmatism.”⁶ However, in a broader perspective, Ninian Smart argues that the doctrinal dimension is one of six central dimensions of religion.⁷ Similarly, Richard Comstock states that doctrine is “a category in the comparative study of religion that belongs with ritual, sacrament, mystical experience,”⁸ and he further writes that terms like *torah* in Judaism, *kalám* in Islam, *darshana* and *dharma* in Hinduism and Buddhism, and *chiao* in Confucianism and Taoism, all convey similar meanings of “doctrine” or “teaching.”⁹ Indeed, the very term doctrine can etymologically be derived from the Latin doctrina “teaching” (from *docere*, “to teach”)¹⁰ and it is commonly understood as “something that is taught,” “a principle,” “the whole body of principles in a branch of knowledge,” and a “system of belief.”¹¹ The term is therefore often found associated with other religious terms and concepts like belief, catechesis, creed, confession, dogma, and kerygma.¹²

In a general perspective on the nature of doctrine, Smart defines doctrines as “an attempt to give system, clarity and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolical language of religious faith and ritual.”¹³ Although Smart defines doctrines “as an attempt to give system,” in his later writings he points out that doctrines “are not rigidly systematic,” but that they “are more like

schemes than systems.” Moreover, he maintains that a “scheme is organic,” and he seems to imply a hermeneutic principle when he further argues that “to understand a scheme, it is important to see each part in the context of the whole.”¹⁴

Smart also enumerates five functions of doctrine, which are to:

- bring order to what is given by revelation
- safeguard the reference myths have to that which lies Beyond
- relate their claims to the current knowledge of the age
- reflect and stimulate a fresh vision of the world
- define the community¹⁵

These five points can finally be compared with R. M. Speight’s eight functions of creeds as:

- the basis of membership
- a test of orthodoxy
- a type of prayer
- a basis for religious instruction
- a corporate or individual response in faith to divine revelation
- an expression of self-understanding by the religious community
- an assertion and confirmation of the unity of the community
- a witness to the world, expressing the core of belief¹⁶

It is here noteworthy that Smart’s fifth and Speight’s sixth points include self-definition and self-understanding as functions of doctrines/creeds in that they “define the community” and that they are “an expression of self-understanding by the religious community.” Similarly, McGrath states that “Doctrine defines communities of discourse, possessing a representative character, attempting to describe or prescribe the beliefs of a community.”¹⁷ Speight’s last point, “expressing the core of belief,” is particularly illuminating since this paper argues that the Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation is “the bedrock of Bahá’í belief.”

In sum, the purpose of this paper is to show that the Bahá’í idea or concept of progressive revelation is explicitly¹⁸ described as a “doctrine,” “something that is taught,” “a scheme,” “a principle” and that it even is labeled as a “philosophy,” that it expresses “the core of belief,” and, ultimately, that it not only defines the Bahá’í community but the Bahá’í Faith itself.

THE DOCTRINE OF PROGRESSIVE REVELATION:

The Term Progressive Revelation in the Writings of the Central Figures

In order to determine if the concept of progressive revelation explicitly¹⁹ is a Bahá’í doctrine, it is first necessary to investigate the English technical term progressive revelation as it occurs in the Bahá’í writings.

Bahá’u’lláh

The technical term progressive revelation occurs in the English translations of the extant writings of Bahá’u’lláh only once and in the following passage of *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*:

Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestations of Adam with that of the Báb. I testify before God that each one of these Manifestations hath been sent down through the operation of the Divine Will and Purpose, that each hath been the bearer of a specific Message, that each hath been entrusted with a divinely revealed Book and been commissioned to unravel the mysteries of a mighty Tablet. The measure of the Revelation with which every one of them hath been definitely fore-ordained ...And when this process of *progressive Revelation* culminated...He chose to hide His own Self behind a thousand veils, lest profane and mortal eyes discover His glory.²⁰

The original passage is in Arabic and was translated by Shoghi Effendi. However, it is important to note that an equivalent to the technical term progressive revelation never occurs in the original Arabic

text. However, it is significant that the term occurs in the internal context of the above passage and especially in connection with such key terms as the “chain of successive Revelations,”²¹ and the “Manifestations” (i.e., the Manifestations of God).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Similarly, the technical term progressive revelation never occurs in any of the extant English translations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oral or literary works, but a couple of close equivalents can easily be found. The following passages may serve to exemplify this:

*Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and non-progressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead. The divine institutes are continuously active and evolutionary; therefore, the revelation of them must be progressive and continuous.*²²

*Among the bounties of God is revelation. Hence revelation is progressive and continuous. It never ceases. It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world. The reality of Divinity is like an endless ocean. Revelation may be likened to the rain.*²³

In the first passage religion itself is seen as progressive. Further, it is significant that in both passages the term progressive is directly coupled with the term continuous.

Shoghi Effendi

Of the three central Bahá’í figures,²⁴ Shoghi Effendi is the only one who ever applies the technical term progressive revelation, although, as shall be seen below, he apparently did not coin this term. In a letter, written in 1935, Shoghi Effendi states that he made a “tentative and incomplete list of the subjects referred to in these translations.”²⁵ Among the fifty-four subjects enumerated, Shoghi Effendi mentions the “Unity of Prophets” as the first subject. However, what is significant in this context is that, as subject forty-three, he briefly states that “*Divine Revelation is progressive.*” Generally, and similar to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement above, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly writes that “*Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process.*”²⁶ Further, writing on the topic of religions, Shoghi Effendi states that “*One cannot call one World Faith superior to another, as they all come from God; they are progressive, each suited to certain needs of the time.*”²⁷ Elsewhere he also refers to “*a series of progressive dispensations associated with Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and other Prophets.*”²⁸

More specifically, Shoghi Effendi explicitly, directly, and frequently employs the technical term progressive revelation. For example, writing about the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh in both his *God Passes By* and *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, he refers to the Bábí and Bahá’í “Dispensation” as encompassing fifty years of “*continuous and progressive Revelation.*”²⁹ Once again it can be noted that the term progressive is coupled with the term continuous. Other expressions in the singular are:

- *the concept of progressive religion*³⁰
- *the principle of progressive revelation*³¹
- *the Bahá’í philosophy of progressive revelation*³²

Shoghi Effendi also uses plural terms of progressive revelations like:

- *series of progressive Revelations*³³
- *a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations*³⁴
- *one link in the chain of continually progressive Revelations*³⁵
- *a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations*³⁶

Consequently, with regard to the three central Bahá’í figures and the technical term progressive revelation, it should now be clear that this term occurs only once (as translated by Shoghi Effendi) and implicitly in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh; it is implicitly, indirectly, and rarely stated in the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá;³⁷ but it is explicitly, directly, and frequently employed by Shoghi Effendi.³⁸

The Term Progressive Revelation in the Writings of Other Authors

However, Shoghi Effendi is apparently not the first Bahá’í author who uses this term, but it is highly interesting and significant that its first usage in a Bahá’í context is made by Shoghi Effendi’s close British friend, J. E. Esslemont (1874–1925), who also was his English language secretary.³⁹ Thus, the perhaps earliest dating of the English term progressive revelation in Bahá’í [usage] occurs as the subtitle of the eighth chapter on “Religious Unity” in Esslemont’s *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*, published in 1923.⁴⁰ It is also important to note that in 1919, Esslemont sent chapters of his book for approval to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who, before he died in 1921, revised the first nine chapters.⁴¹ Although Esslemont never elaborates on the term, he does refer to passages by Bahá’u’lláh⁴² and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.⁴³ Esslemont, however, may not be the first Bahá’í author to use the term progressive revelation, since William Collins writes that “From somewhere around 1900, American Bahá’ís had access to the biblical interpretations found in Bahá’í scriptures, upon which a sound concept of *progressive revelation* could be based.”⁴⁴ In addition, Samuel Wilson states that early English speaking Bahá’í writers (e.g., Kheiralla, Remey, Dealy, and Brittingham)⁴⁵ “refer[red] to Miller, Cummings, Seiss, Guinness, and others.”⁴⁶ This is a crucial statement, since the Guinness Wilson is referring to is most likely Henry Grattan-Guinness, who employed the technical term progressive revelation already in 1878.⁴⁷

Another person who frequently used the term progressive revelation was the former Anglican priest George Townshend⁴⁸ (1876–1957), who also was a close friend to Shoghi Effendi. In this context it is especially noteworthy since Shoghi Effendi greatly admired his command of English and therefore sent him his translations and manuscripts.⁴⁹

In 1954 the term progressive revelation makes a clear and definite appearance since John Ferraby used the term as the very title of a pamphlet. More recently, progressive revelation has, in English Bahá’í literature, variously been referred to as the:

- *idea of progressive revelation*⁵⁰
- *principle of progressive revelation*⁵¹
- *process of progressive revelation*⁵²
- *theme of progressive revelation*⁵³
- *Bahá’í thesis of Progressive Revelation*⁵⁴
- *Bahá’í notion of progressive revelation*⁵⁵
- *concept of progressive revelation*⁵⁶
- *basic Bahá’í teaching of progressive revelation*⁵⁷

Progressive Revelation as an Explicit Doctrine

The Doctrine of Progressive Revelation in the Writings of the Central Figures

Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

It should be clearly stated that from the extant English sources of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá neither author explicitly declared progressive revelation as a doctrine. However, quite a few Bahá’í scholars state that Bahá’u’lláh’s *Kitáb-i-Íqán* not only “enunciates the essential doctrinal principles of the Bahá’í revelation,”⁵⁸ but that it also has been referred to as “Bahá’u’lláh’s foremost doctrinal work.”⁵⁹ Other Bahá’í authors have argued that Bahá’u’lláh’s *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is the primary Bahá’í textbook on progressive revelation. Thus, for example, Adib Taherzadeh states that the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* has “unfolded the pattern and disclosed the meaning of progressive revelation,”⁶⁰ and similarly, William Hatcher states that it is “Bahá’u’lláh’s most important doctrinal work”⁶¹ and that it “discusses progressive revelation.”⁶² In addition, Seena Fazel & Khazeh Fananapazir state that Bahá’u’lláh’s *Súriy-i-Sabr* is “a tablet devoted to the exposition of the theme of progressive revelation.”⁶³

In the case of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, it is significant that he states:

*In every Dispensation the light of Divine Guidance has been focused upon one central theme.... In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind.*⁶⁴

From this passage it would be possible to conclude that “the Oneness of Mankind” could be considered the “central theme” of Bahá’í [doctrine]. However, during his travels to Europe and America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also formulated what has been referred to as “a core set of Bahá’í ‘principles’”⁶⁵ and which “could assume creedal formulation as a simple summary of the Bahá’í Faith.”⁶⁶ Foremost among these principles is the principle which states that “it is incumbent upon all mankind to investigate the truth.” It is significant that included in this first principle ‘Abdu’l-Bahá alludes to a central theme, or aspect, of progressive revelation - that of an essential religious unity—since he states that “The different religions have one truth underlying them, their reality is one... All the divine Prophets and Messengers were the instruments and channels of this same eternal, essential truth.”⁶⁷

Shoghi Effendi

Earlier it was seen that only Shoghi Effendi utilize the technical term progressive revelation. Shoghi Effendi also refers to Bahá’í doctrines in general statements like “The principles” and “fundamentals of the Faith,”⁶⁸ “basic and sacred principles,”⁶⁹ “verities of the Faith,”⁷⁰ “the essential verities of the Faith,”⁷¹ “truths which lie at the basis of our Faith,”⁷² “the major beliefs of our Faith,”⁷³ and “*the principles and precepts constituting the bedrock of [the] Faith,*”⁷⁴ and “*the incontrovertible principles that constitute the bedrock of Bahá’í belief.*”⁷⁵ More specifically, he positively identifies “the oneness of the entire human race” as “*the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the [Bahá’í] Faith.*”⁷⁶ Once again, the oneness of mankind may seem as the fundamental Bahá’í doctrine. The following paragraphs by Shoghi Effendi, however, can be used to directly ascertain that progressive revelation also is explicitly stated as a central Bahá’í doctrine, here referred as a principle:

*The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh...is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process.*⁷⁷

*Its [the Bahá’í Faith’s] teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.*⁷⁸

*the fundamental principle which constitutes the Bedrock of Bahá’í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final.*⁷⁹

*The Faith of Bahá’u’lláh should indeed be regarded...as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations.*⁸⁰

It is possible to interpret the first three paragraphs above that “religious truth is not absolute but relative” as a separate principle from “Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process,” or that that “Divine Revelation is progressive.” Moreover, by the very fact that it is mentioned first, the principle of “religious relativity” could be considered as the fundamental principle of Bahá’í. It is also possible, however, to see the two sentences as inseparably related and as a more elaborate version of a single principle. Two other passages by Shoghi Effendi may clarify this relationship in determining whether they are to be treated as two separate principles, or as one single principle:

*Let none, however, mistake my purpose, or misrepresent this cardinal truth which is of the essence of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. The divine origin of all the Prophets of God—including Jesus Christ and the Apostle of God [Muhammed], the two greatest Manifestations preceding the Revelation of the Báb—is unreservedly and unshakably upheld by each and every follower of the Bahá’í-religion. The fundamental unity of these Messengers of God is clearly recognized, the continuity of their Revelation is affirmed.*⁸¹

Here Shoghi Effendi indirectly refers to the “continuity of their Revelation” as a “cardinal truth which is of the essence of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.” In the first sections above, one may also notice that the term continuous is directly coupled with the term progressive, whereas the last quote contains the term successive. In *The Promised Day is Come*, and in a chapter significantly entitled “The Continuity of Revelation,” Shoghi Effendi once again uses a similar expression:

Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá’u’lláh inculcates the basic principle of the rela-

*tivity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience.*⁸²

What is especially noteworthy in this passage is that Shoghi Effendi uses the singular “basic principle,” but, more importantly, he links not only the terms “relativity” and “continuity,” but he is in turn relating these to the expression “progressiveness.”

As a further support that the unity of the “Messengers of God” is seen as a central doctrine of Bahá’í, can be seen in the next passage by Shoghi Effendi:

That all the Messengers of God should be regarded as “abiding in the same Tabernacle, soaring in the same Heaven, seated upon the same Throne, uttering the same Speech, and proclaiming the same Faith”⁸³ must...remain the unalterable foundation and central tenet of Bahá’í belief.⁸⁴

In addition, Shoghi Effendi states in a similar context of the “unity of the Manifestations of God” that to regard Bahá’u’lláh “as essentially one of these Manifestations of God...is one of the major beliefs of our Faith.”⁸⁵

As a final support that Shoghi Effendi considers progressive revelation a central Bahá’í doctrine is that he states that:

the Bahá’í philosophy of progressive revelation...should be thoroughly accepted and taught by every loyal...Bahá’í.⁸⁶

In accordance with the definitions of doctrine reviewed above, it is significant to note that the philosophy of progressive revelation should not only be “thoroughly accepted,” but it should be taught as well.

The Doctrine of Progressive Revelation in the Writings of Other Authors

Although it is clear that is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and especially Shoghi Effendi have been most instrumental in systematizing various Bahá’í doctrines, other Bahá’í authors have used the term doctrine only recently. For example, in 1931 Mabel Hyde Paine recorded, in her “Pilgrims’ Notes” the following lines, attributed to Shoghi Effendi:

Progressive revelation is the basis of Bahá’í Teachings.⁸⁷

Although such a statement cannot be considered authoritative, it suggests a doctrinal status of progressive revelation. More recently, Schaefer states that the “theological pivot [of the Bahá’í Faith] is the teaching of the unity of the Manifestations [of God], and, hence, the unity of the religions.”⁸⁸ Stockman also refers to progressive revelation as “the fundamental Bahá’í teaching.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Michael Sours, who devotes a chapter to progressive revelation,⁹⁰ states that “At the core of Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching is the belief in the complete oneness and progressiveness of religion.”⁹¹ In like manner, under the heading “Basic Teachings,” William Hatcher & Douglas Martin refer to “three fundamental principles,” as: 1) The Oneness of God, 2) The Oneness of Humanity, and 3) Oneness of Religion. A description of progressive revelation is included in the third principle.⁹²

However, the first author to use the terms “*the Baha’i doctrine of progressive revelation*” was not a Bahá’í but a non-Bahá’í, Peter L. Berger, the famous sociologist of religion.⁹³ It would take more than thirty years [before] Robert Stockman would use the exact same terms.⁹⁴ In this context it is especially significant that in 1954 Berger also wrote that “*Progressive revelation is still held as a cardinal doctrine by the Baha’is to this day...*”⁹⁵

That the concept of an essential unity of religions is connected with progressive revelation and Bahá’í doctrine can be seen in a statement by Moojan Momen:

The concept of the unity of religions is one of the key doctrines of the Bahá’í Faith. At its most basic level, this doctrine can be expressed as the belief that the different religious systems of the world merely reflect different stages in a single process, the progressive unfolding of religious “Truth.”⁹⁶

Here one may notice the expression “key doctrines” and the statement “At its most basic level,” and that it is related to “the progressive unfoldment of religious ‘Truth.’” Similarly, when Dann May states that “The Bahá’í concept of religious unity...is one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Bahá’í Faith,” he continues to describe this doctrine as follows:

*This doctrine affirms the existence of a common transcendent source from which the world’s religious traditions originate and receive their inspiration. The Bahá’í writings view the religions of the world not as isolated and sporadic events, but as participants in a successively unfolding process called progressive revelation.*⁹⁷

Indirectly addressing the concept of progressive revelation, Alessandro Bausani succinctly states that “the whole Bahá’í Faith is centered on this theophanical idea [evolution in time, and unity in the present hour]” and that “*all of the doctrines of the Faith can be encompassed by the phrase ‘evolution in time.’*”⁹⁸ The three keywords here are: theophany (“the Manifestation of God”), evolution (“progress”), and unity, terms and concepts which all play primary roles in the Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation.

Progressive revelation has also been discussed in relation to Islam.⁹⁹ Heshmat Moayyad, for example, discusses progressive revelation in the context of the Islamic “Seal of the Prophet doctrine” and religious finality, and refers to it as “*the Bahá’í doctrine of continuing, progressive revelation.*”¹⁰⁰ Stephen Lambden writes that Bahá’í in some respects is “neo-Islamic” in that certain Bahá’í doctrines (e.g., *tawhíd*, *al-ism al-‘azam*, and progressive revelation) are “obviously Islamic.”¹⁰¹

Juan Cole is the first author who uses the term “The Babi-Baha’i doctrine of progressive revelation” and it is significant that he views this doctrine in terms of “a continuous sacred history.”¹⁰² Loni Bramson-Lerche states that progressive revelation is an “*important doctrine of the Bahá’í Faith.*”¹⁰³ Schaefer goes one step further and in a chapter entitled “The New Paradigm: Progressive Revelation,” since he refers to progressive revelation as a “*fundamental doctrine.*”¹⁰⁴ Most recently, in a review article of the earlier mentioned *Revisioning the Sacred*, it is notable that Susan Stiles Maneck uses the terms “the Bahá’í doctrine of Progressive Revelation.”¹⁰⁵

The one Bahá’í author who most clearly and elaborately states that progressive revelation is not only an important Bahá’í doctrine, but the central one, is Nader Saiedi. Although he also states that the doctrine of the Manifestation of God “is a fundamental, central, theological, philosophical, and sociological concept of the Bahá’í Faith,” he simultaneously states that the “*doctrine of progressive revelation can be characterized as the central theological principle of the Bahai Faith.*”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, even though Saiedi states that progressive revelation is “One of the most important principles of Bahá’í theology,”¹⁰⁷ he also points to its complexity when he declares that “the doctrine of progressive revelation” simultaneously is “a theory of knowledge, a metaphysics of being, a prophethology, a theology, an eschatology, a social theory, an ethical doctrine, and an aesthetic approach to life.”¹⁰⁸

Finally, it should also be mentioned that the term and concept of progressive revelation has been portrayed in the form of a video,¹⁰⁹ it has also found its way into various Bahá’í dictionaries, a Bahá’í encyclopedia, and is central to many Bahá’í home-pages.¹¹⁰ Most significantly, the official Bahá’í home-page, which includes various “Spiritual Truths” of Bahá’í, it is noteworthy that “The Oneness of Religion” is included, and that “The principle of the unity of religion” is described as being “at the center of Bahá’í teachings.”¹¹¹ That progressive revelation has acquired doctrinal status in Bahá’í is clear since the International Bahá’í Library (Israel) classifies progressive revelation under the heading “Doctrines, Theology.”¹¹² That the doctrines of manifestation and progressive revelation are intimately related and important, can be seen in that a graduate-course, developed and taught by Landegg Academy (Switzerland), entitled “Comparative Study of Religion and the Concepts of the Manifestation and Progressive Revelation.”¹¹³

A final, and very recent example, that the Bahá’í Faith can be understood in terms of progressive revelation may also be seen a non-Bahá’í source—the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

The cornerstone of Baha’i belief is the conviction that Baha’ Ullah and his forerunner, who was known as the Bab, were manifestations of God, who in his essence is unknowable. The principal

*Bahá'í tenets are the essential unity of all religions and the unity of humanity. Bahá'ís believe that all the founders of the world's great religions have been manifestations of God and agents of a progressive divine plan for the education of the human race.*¹¹⁴

What is especially interesting with these introductory remarks of describing the Bahá'í Faith is that they immediately, albeit implicitly, identify progressive revelation as the “cornerstone of Baha’i belief” and that “the essential unity of all religions” is one of “principal Baha’i tenets.” The final sentence above connects the various points raised earlier since “the world’s great religions have been manifestations of God” (including the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh) are all part of “a progressive divine plan” i.e., progressive revelation.

Progressive Revelation Defined

To cite a few examples of Bahá'í definitions of progressive revelation, the following examples will suffice. In *Daybook—Passages for Deepening and Meditation*, the reader is asked the question “What is meant by the term progressive revelation?” whereupon the answer is given as:

*Progressive revelation refers to the belief that God has a great plan which He unfolds to man in different periods in history. Each Messenger of God (such as Moses, Christ, and Bahá'u'lláh) reveals a new stage of this plan.*¹¹⁵

A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary defines progressive revelation as:

The concept that Divine Revelation is not final, but continuing. The concept is founded on the belief that all the Greater Prophets of the past were Manifestations of God who appeared in different ages with teachings appropriate to the needs of the time....¹¹⁶

Similarly, in *A Resource Guide for the Scholarly Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, progressive revelation is defined as:

The Bahá'í belief that the major religions have been founded by Manifestations of God and that the Manifestations succeed one another, each bringing a greater measure of divine truth to humanity.¹¹⁷

Finally, the most elaborate attempt to concisely articulate progressive revelation has been made by Stockman, who, in a Bahá'í Encyclopedia article, states:

*Possibly the central principle behind the Bahá'í concept of the oneness of religion, progressive revelation asserts two important positions: 1) that all the major religions of the world are at least partially based on a divine revelation, conveyed to them by a Manifestation of God; and 2) that the revelations brought by the Manifestations are not contradictory, but constitute a single, ongoing divine educational process for humanity.*¹¹⁸

In this context it is notable that Stockman states that progressive revelation possibly is “the central principle behind the Bahá'í concept of the oneness of religion.”

From these four definitions a few recurrent themes emerge. First of all, it is evident that three of the definitions refer to progressive revelation as a belief, while one designates it as a central principle. Secondly, the notion of Manifestations of God occur in all four definitions, and thirdly, the inclusion of various key terms such as succession (“succeed”) and continuity (“continuing”) are significant.

Taken together, these examples strongly suggests that progressive revelation can indeed be understood as a “belief” and “something that is taught.”

The Process of Doctrinalization

In this context it is significant that E. G. Browne stated that the Bábí-Bahá'í teachings were “varying and unfixed,” and that he noted that it contained little doctrine “touching on questions of Metaphysics, Ontology, or Eschatology.”¹¹⁹ Although Ibrahim Kheiralla introduced many idiosyncratic and highly personal ideas into the early American Bahá'í community, he still emphasized “the Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation.”¹²⁰ Although his list of “Prophets” did include Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha,

Christ, and Muhammad, he also included such religious figures as Confucius¹²¹ and Haiwatha.¹²² With the advent of a few Persian Bahá’í teachers to America to clarify the Bahá’í Faith,¹²³ it is noteworthy that, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Karím-i-Tihrání may have discussed progressive revelation as early as 1890.¹²⁴

Moreover, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a dozen American Bahá’ís attempted to summarize lists of the Bahá’í teachings. An early example of such a list may be exemplified by Corinne True, who in 1902 entitled her list “Fundamental Points of Behaism.” What is especially interesting in this context is that the list was “dominated by points on progressive revelation and the central figures of the Bahá’í Faith.”¹²⁵ It is also significant that two years later, and what was called “the House of Spirituality” in Chicago, “added a note” to its Constitution “that demonstrated the fascination of the early American Bahá’ís with the Bahá’í principle of progressive revelation and with their Faith’s fulfillment of prophecy.”¹²⁶ Simultaneously, Peter Smith also states that in the American Bahá’í community, at the beginning of the twentieth century, “There was no credo to affirm” and that there was “the lack of any credal formulation beyond the statement of universal principles” and further that there was even “opposition toward the idea of dogma.”¹²⁷ Thus, it is informative that in 1908 Thornton Chase writes the following lines about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Unless questions of metaphysics, dogmas and doctrines are introduced, he seldom mentions them.”¹²⁸ It is also of interest that even as late as 1915 Wilson wrote that “Bahaism has not a fixed body of doctrines.”¹²⁹ However, Peter Smith maintains that in 1917 (which was the centennial celebration of Bahá’u’lláh’s birth) some Chicago Bahá’ís had plans for teaching in the Central States in the U.S.A. and where “pure doctrine were asserted in no uncertain terms,”¹³⁰ and he further states that with Shoghi Effendi’s publication of *The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh* in 1934 the “doctrinal confusion” was ended.¹³¹

Conclusion

It should by now be evident that the term and concept progressive revelation has undergone what may be referred to as a “process of doctrinalization.” Starting with Bahá’u’lláh, neither the term nor the doctrine of progressive revelation were explicitly stated. Gradually, and most likely inspired by visiting Persian Bahá’í teachers to America, various attempts to make lists to summarize the Bahá’í teachings were made. A few years later ‘Abdu’l-Bahá formulated a set of core-principles during his travels to the West, among which the essential unity of religions was central. Subsequently, with Shoghi Effendi’s extensive correspondence with the globally expanding Bahá’í Faith, principles of administrations were set, and a variety of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings were translated. Although the technical term progressive revelation antedates Shoghi Effendi’s “Guardianship,” it is only during his administration that it became a central doctrine.¹³² Following the terminology introduced by Shoghi Effendi, later Bahá’í authors alternatively have referred to progressive revelation as an idea, concept, principle, theme, thesis, and basic Bahá’í teaching, and most importantly, as a belief and doctrine. The ultimate step in the process of doctrinalization can be seen when the very term progressive revelation not only entered Bahá’í pamphlets, dictionaries, encyclopedias, the International Bahá’í Library, and the official Bahá’í home-page, as a key term, concept, and doctrine, but, most significantly, that it also has been taught as a graduate course.

From this brief review it should by now be evident that it is possible to find direct and explicit support in various texts by the central Bahá’í figures and other authors, that the idea of progressive revelation is not just an idea or a concept, but that it is a central Bahá’í doctrine. If not the central doctrine, then at least, together with the doctrine of the oneness of humankind, one of the most central Bahá’í doctrines. Thus, any attempts to build a future Bahá’í theology—in order to define, understand, and express the Bahá’í Faith—must be solidly built on this, the “Bedrock of Bahá’í Belief.”

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Notes

- 1) Encyclopedia Britannica 1987:366.
- 2) McGrath 1997:197.
- 3) Schaefer 1992:26, italics added.
- 4) Dann May's MA thesis (1993) *The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity and the Challenge of Radical Pluralism* certainly qualifies as a scholarly work on the "oneness of religion."
- 5) McLean 1997:xv, clarification and italics added; Smith 1988:232. Far from claiming to be a systematic theologian, much less "the systematic Bahá'í theologian," I still hope that this paper (and especially my forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation) will be regarded as a preliminary academic attempt to address not only the topic of progressive revelation, but to simultaneously investigate areas like Bahá'í prophecy, the idea of progress, doctrine, rhetoric and root-metaphor. The forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation is currently entitled *The Emic Construction of Religion: The Bahá'í Doctrine, Rhetoric, and Root-Metaphor of Progressive Revelation*.
- 6) In this context it is interesting that Lindbeck 1984:76 notices that "Most of the books entitled 'church doctrine' or 'church dogmatics', . . . are in fact wide-ranging theological treatises rather than being concerned simply with doctrines of the churches in the narrow sense . . ." Erickson 1983:23 sees "Theological studies" as a general field of study where "Doctrinal studies" is but one subspecies which further can be divided into "Systematic theology."
- 7) Smart's 1983:96-158, 1984:6-12 six dimensions of religion are: 1) the Experiential Dimension; 2) the Mythic Dimension; 3) the Doctrinal Dimension; 4) the Ethical Dimension; 5) the Ritual Dimension; and 6) the Social Dimension.
- 8) Comstock 1987:386.
- 9) Comstock 1987:385-386.
- 10) The Latin *docere* may in turn be derived from the Greek *dokēin* (to seem, to teach) which again is the root for the Greek *dogma* (opinion, teaching) and *orthodox* (right opinion, teaching). See e.g., Skeat 1984. The Greek term *didaskalia* also gives a similar meaning of "basic teachings" and is used in I and II Timothy.
- 11) Longman 1978:322.
- 12) See Lindbeck 1974:243-246; 1984:88; New Catholic 1967:939.
- 13) Smart 1984:8, italics added; 1983:97.
- 14) Smart 1983:102. Cf. Shoghi Effendi's statement that "We must take the teachings as a great balanced whole, not to seek out and oppose each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between there are links uniting the two. This is what makes our Faith to flexible and well balanced." (19 March 1945 to an individual believer)
- 15) Smart 1983:97-100, italics added; McGrath 1990:37.
- 16) Speight 1987, italics added.
- 17) McGrath 1997:11, italics added, 39, 80, 196-197; Christian 1987:14, 20; Smart 1996:56.

Lights of ‘Irfán

- 18) In my dissertation I also attempt to show that it is also implicitly part of a “whole body of principles,” and at that it is at the core of its “system of belief”.
- 19) With explicit statements of the Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation means statements where either the concept, or the term progressive revelation, occur together with the term “doctrine” or an equivalent.
- 20) Bahá’u’lláh 1983a:74-75; 1986:418-419, italics added.
- 21) For a discussion on the theme of “the chain of successive Revelations” see Lundberg (forthcoming). [22] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982b:140, italics added.
- 23) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982b: 378, italics added
- 24) Although Shoghi Effendi 1991:131 refers to the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “Three Central Figures,” he simultaneously attests to “the independent character of the Bábí Dispensation” (102) and that the Báb “is fully entitled to rank as one of the self-sufficient Manifestations of God” invested with “independent Prophethood.” (123) Thus, the Báb is not considered here. For a discussion on this see Esslemont 1980:20; Smith 1988:228.
- 25) Dated May 13, 1935, addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada.
- 26) Shoghi Effendi 1980:v, italics added; 1991:58, 115.
- 27) Shoghi Effendi 1973:40, italics added.
- 28) Shoghi Effendi 1971b:154, italics added.
- 29) Shoghi Effendi 1974:223; 1991:143, italics added.
- 30) Shoghi Effendi 1981:451, italics added.
- 31) Shoghi Effendi 1991:102, italics added.
- 32) Shoghi Effendi 1981:432, italics added.
- 33) Shoghi Effendi 1965:82, italics added.
- 34) Shoghi Effendi 1991:103, italics added.
- 35) Shoghi Effendi 1974:100, italics added.
- 36) Shoghi Effendi 1991:163, italics added.
- 37) Esslemont 1980:257 is an example of an implicit statement since progressive revelation is stated in parenthesis.
- 38) Lundberg 1996.
- 39) Momen 1975:19, 32-33.
- 40) Esslemont 1980:122. The term occurs also indirectly on p. 257 where it is attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.
- 41) Esslemont 1980:xiii; Momen 1975:11-19.
- 42) Esslemont quotes from a Tablet by Bahá’u’lláh which he labels a Tablet to a Zoroastrian. This passage can be found in A tablet by Bahá’o’llah to the Persian Zoroastrian Bahais published in 1910 in *Star of the West* and reprinted in *Bahá’u’lláh* 1978: book 1. vol 1.
- 43) See Fazel 1993.
- 44) Collins 1995:61, italics added.
- 45) i.e., Ibrahim Kheiralla, Mason Remey, Paul K. Dealy, and Isabella D. Brittingham. For a reference of their lives and works see Stockman 1985, 1995; Collins 1990.
- 46) Wilson 1970:102.
- 47) Grattan-Guinness 1878.
- 48) See e.g., Townshend 1995:37, 68, 73, 76, 111, 116.
- 49) Whitehead 1976:211.
- 50) Ward 1960:112; Heggie 1986:vii; Smith 1988:223; Cole 1993:453, italics added.
- 51) Moayyad 1990:76, 82; Collins 1995:86, italics added.
- 52) Sours 1997:43, italics added.
- 53) Buck 1995:121, 281-82, italics added.
- 54) Saiedi 1998:76, italics added.
- 55) Smith 1988:223, italics added.
- 56) Ward 1960:40-41, 154, italics added; Smith 1988:223, Collins 1995:191; Buck 1998:6.
- 57) Stockman 1995:233, italics added.
- 58) Hatcher 1997:39, italics added; Buck 1995:281-82; McLean 1997:xv.
- 59) Buck 1998:5.
- 60) Taherzadeh 1987:vol. I:162; Buck 1995:281-82; McLean 1997:xv.
- 61) In the foreword of his translation of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 1931, Shoghi Effendi refers to it as “this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation.”
- 62) Hatcher 1997:35-36.
- 63) Fazel & Fananapazir 1993:25.
- 64) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoted in Shoghi Effendi 1991:36, italics added; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982a:114.
- 65) Buck 1998:5; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1979:131-175, 1982a:107-108, 1982b:105-110.
- 66) Smith 1982:128, 127

Lights of ‘Irfán

- 67) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982b:105-106.
- 68) Research Department 1983:21 (#73).
- 69) Shoghi Effendi 1991:123.
- 70) Shoghi Effendi cited in Hornby 1988:484, #1612.
- 71) Research Department 1983:27 (#90), 45-47; Shoghi Effendi 1965:76-77; 1971a:75-76, 93.
- 72) Shoghi Effendi 1991:99.
- 73) Shoghi Effendi 1991:114.
- 74) Shoghi Effendi 1974:158, italics added.
- 75) Shoghi Effendi 1980:110, italics added. From these two last quotes by Shoghi Effendi, it is evident that the phrase “the bedrock of Bahá’í belief” here occurs in other, but similar, contexts.
- 76) Shoghi Effendi 1974:281, italics and clarification added; 1991:42.
- 77) Shoghi Effendi 1980:v, italics added
- 78) Shoghi Effendi 1991:48, clarification and italics added.
- 79) Shoghi Effendi 1991:114-115, italics added; 57-58.
- 80) Shoghi Effendi 1991:103, italics added; 163; 1974:10.
- 81) Shoghi Effendi 1980:107-108, clarification and italics added.
- 82) Shoghi Effendi 1980:108, italics added
- 83) See Bahá’u’lláh’s *Kitáb-i-Iqán* 1983b:153-54.
- 84) Shoghi Effendi 1991:166, clarification and italics added.
- 85) Shoghi Effendi 1991:114, italics added.
- 86) Shoghi Effendi 1981:432, italics added.
- 87) Hyde Paine 1931:4, italics added.
- 88) Schaefer 1995:57, clarification added.
- 89) Stockman 1985:192.
- 90) Sours 1990:137-169, 6-7.
- 91) Sours 1997:42; Smith 1988:246.
- 92) Hatcher & Martin 1989:74-83.
- 93) Berger 1954:184, italics added.
- 94) Stockman 1985:58. The term has since been used by Smith 1987:73; Cole 1993:454; and Buck 1996:129, 133.
- 95) Berger 1954:31-32, italics added; Beckwith 1985:10.
- 96) Momen 1988:185, italics added.
- 97) May 1993:83, italics added.
- 98) Bausani 1985:ix-x, italics added.
- 100) Moayyad 1990:78, italics added.
- 101) Lambden 1991:9.
- 102) Cole 1996:45-46; Buck 1998:6.
- 103) Bramson-Lerche 1988:281, italics added.
- 104) Schaefer 1995:118, italics added, 132-33, 135, 144.
- 105) Stiles Maneck 1999:92.
- 106) Saiedi 1997:course description, italics added.
- 107) Saiedi 1998:83.
- 108) Saiedi 1997:course description.
- 109) Kolstoe 1995.
- 110) Virtual Study Course; The Bahá’í Faith; Progressive Revelation; The KnowMadz - Baha’i Faith.
- 111) The Bahá’í World.
- 112) International Bahá’í Library. Other subgroups under the heading “Doctrines, Theology” are e.g., “God,” “Manifestations of God,” “Oneness,” “Prophecy,” “Future Manifestations of God,” “Covenant,” etc.
- 113) Landegg 1997.
- 114) *Encyclopædia Britannica* Online, italics added.
- 115) Bahá’í Publishing Trust 1985:194, italics original.
- 116) Momen 1991:186.
- 117) A Resource Guide - Glossary. [
- 118) Stockman 1993:1, italics added.
- 119) Browne 1912:xxv-xxvi.
- 120) Stockman 1985:58, 192.
- 121) Confucius is not Manifestation of God according to Shoghi Effendi 1971a:41 who says that “Confucius was not a Prophet. It is quite correct to say he is the founder of a moral system and a great reformer.”

Lights of ‘Irfán

- 122) Stockman 1985:67. For a discussion on Native American religious figures and Manifestations of God see Buck 1996.
- 123) On this point Banani 1981:xiv writes that “The nascent community of Bahá’ís in America was in dire need of an authoritative and coherent understanding of the fundamentals of its Faith.” (italics added)
- 124) Stockman 1985:23. That Mírzá Abú’l-Fadl Gulpáygání clearly was aware of, and implicitly elaborated upon, the concept of progressive revelation is evident from his *A Letter to Tripoli* written in 1897. See Cole 1985:124-126.
- 125) Stockman 1985:92-93, italics added.
- 126) Stockman 1985:168, italics added.
- 127) Smith 1982:196-97, 168, 174.
- 128) Chase 1908:34.
- 129) Wilson 1970:77.
- 130) Smith 1982:134.
- 131) Smith 1982:102.
- 132) e.g., Bramson-Lerche 1982:265 writes that “Shoghi Effendi continued to push the community in the direction of better organization and more unity in doctrinal matters.”

