

ESSAY/ESSAI/ENSAYO

The Effect of Philosophical and Linguistic Gender Biases on the Degradation of Women's Status in Religion

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Abstract

Gender equality, a prerequisite for the establishment of the oneness of humanity, remains largely unrealized, despite the struggles of the last one hundred and fifty years to attain such equality. The extreme slowness to eradicate the causes of inequality is at least partly due to discriminatory attitudes ingrained in linguistic styles and philosophical suppositions that have left their marks on human thought, behavior, social institutions, and religion. Gender inequality is a widespread phenomenon and its genesis hard to determine. Women's rights have been universally undermined for countless centuries. While the underlying causes of depriving women of their rights and degrading their status may seem different in various parts of the globe, the similar effects they have produced indicate that the root causes must be the same. This article focuses on philosophical and linguistic gender-related biases and their effect on the degradation of women's status in religion. It also offers suggestions for eradicating the causes of inequality in order to hasten world unity.

Résumé

L'égalité des sexes, une condition préalable à l'établissement de l'unité de l'humanité, demeure un objectif qui est encore loin d'être atteint malgré les luttes menées depuis un siècle et demi en vue d'y parvenir. Si cette inégalité est extrêmement lente à disparaître, c'est en partie en raison des attitudes discriminatoires enracinées dans les styles linguistiques et les suppositions philosophiques qui ont marqué la pensée, le comportement et les institutions humaines et religieuses. L'inégalité des sexes est un phénomène très répandu dont l'origine est difficile à déterminer. Les droits de la femme ont été bafoués partout dans le monde, et ce, depuis des siècles innombrables. Bien que les causes sous-jacentes de la privation des droits des femmes et de la dégradation de leur condition peuvent ne pas être les mêmes dans diverse parties du monde, le caractère commun de leurs effets semblerait indiquer que ces causes sont essentiellement les mêmes. Le présent article examine deux questions, soit les préjugés philosophiques et linguistiques fondés sur le sexe et leurs effets sur la dégradation de la condition des femmes dans la religion. L'article offre également des suggestions visant à éliminer les causes de cette inégalité en vue d'hâter l'avènement de l'unité mondiale.

Resumen

La igualdad de géneros, requisito previo para el establecimiento de la unicidad de la humanidad, permanece aún, en gran parte, sin efectuarse, no obstante las luchas de los últimos ciento cincuenta años por lograr tal igualdad. La extrema lentitud en desarraigar las causas de la desigualdad se debe a modos de pensar discriminatorios inculcados en los estilos lingüísticos y en las suposiciones filosóficas que han dejado sus huellas tanto en el pensamiento humano, como en su comportamiento, sus instituciones sociales, y su religión. El desequilibrio en los géneros es un fenómeno de alcance extendido de orígenes difíciles de determinar. Los derechos de la mujer han sido universalmente socavados durante sinnúmero de siglos. Aunque las razones fundamentales de haber despojada a la mujer de sus derechos y de haberle degradada su condición aparentan ser diferentes en distintas partes del globo, los efectos similares que producen indican que los motivos causantes deben tener el mismo origen. Este artículo se concentra en dos asuntos, es decir, las inclinaciones negativas lingüísticas y filosóficas relacionadas con género, y los resultados de las mismas en rebajar la condición de la mujer en la religión. También presenta sugerencias para erradicar las causas de la desigualdad acelerando así la unidad mundial.

The Effect of Philosophy and Language on Religion

No religion admits to partiality, yet the practice of according preferential treatment to the male half of humanity has been justified and defended by almost all religions of the past. Indeed, we are still caught in the use of what is interpreted today as a sexist language prevalent in religious scripture. The result is the impression religion conveys

that it is primarily concerned with the interests of men. If misunderstanding (rather than deliberate misrepresentation and one-sided philosophical treatment of a discriminatory attitude) is to be blamed for the maltreatment of women, the use of language has had much to do with such misunderstanding. Some aspects of philosophy and language responsible for lowering women's status in religion are cited below, and the thesis advanced that gender equality is a prerequisite for the oneness of humanity and world unity.

Indisputably, it is far easier to silence objectors to inequality through the imposition of arbitrary religious restrictions than through reason and logic. To this end, male clergy and theologians interpreted religious texts in their favor and gave undue prominence to references in the holy books that promoted their own interests. They, at the same time, minimized or ignored passages that clearly indicated men and women were created as equal human beings. To ensure that their extrapolations of the scripture would go unchallenged, they deprived women of the benefit of education, rendering them illiterate and incapable of detecting the misrepresentation. Lack of education prevented women from acquiring the powers they needed to challenge men's assumption of a superior role in religion and society-hence, women's acceptance of the maltreatment.

Creation and the Riddle of the Man–Woman Relationship

The Old Testament begins by saying “So God created man in his own image ...male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has confirmed that both men and women were created in God's image and likeness (*Selections* 79). Bahá'u'lláh has stated in clear language that upon the reality of human beings God “hath focused the radiance of all of His J names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self” (*Gleanings* 65). God has conferred upon women and men alike a free will to distinguish good from evil and right from error, sending divine educators from time to time to restate religious truth and guide the people aright. Many men, however, especially philosophers and theologians, have interpreted divine Revelation to promote their own interests and defend their presumed superior status. Details about the genesis of inequality are not known, but traces exist that suggest reasons for its introduction and perpetuation.

Biblical scholars who worked on *The Dartmouth Bible*,² desiring to fathom reasons for existing inconsistencies in the Old Testament, carried out extensive research and made discoveries that help us put things into perspective. According to these scholars, before the Old Testament was last rewritten by the Priestly school about 400 B.C.E., the Elohim and Jahweh schools had produced earlier versions, commingling sacred stories with Hebraic history and myths inherited from Babylon and Canaan. The Priestly school consolidated the earlier versions into one but retained two contradictory stories about the creation of the first pair of human beings. Since the two stories appear in close proximity in the initial chapters of Genesis, their retention must have been deliberate. Did the priests' disagreement result in keeping both versions, or was the prejudice against women so pervasive that they had to pacify the people by including both versions? Whatever the real reason may have been, it either laid the foundation for degrading women's status in religion or gave religious support to discriminatory views already in circulation. It is noteworthy that the distorted creation story was widely accepted and, together with the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, was used by theologians and priests in a way that had an adverse effect on the popular view of women's inherent nature.

Some recent biblical scholars, such as Phyllis Trible, however, believe that “the Bible is sometimes not as patriarchal as translations would make it seem” (Trible, quoted in Murphy, “Women and the Bible” 48). A passage cited as evidence is Deut. 32:18 which, in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, reads: “You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.” Trible says: “Those words ‘gave you birth’ are from a Hebrew term for ‘writhing in labor,’ so the translation, if accurate, is tame. But here is how the Jerusalem Bible translates it: ‘fathered you’” (quoted in Murphy, “Women and the Bible” 48).

When religious scripture was repeatedly selectively interpreted by, religious scholars and institutions to advance a narrow and often negative view of women's inherent nature and the consequent requirement that men “rule over” women, women's low status was reinforced. Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*, argues that

in the Middle East, first in Mesopotamia and Canaan, and later in the Hebrew kingdoms of Judea and Israel, the remaking of sacred stories, along with the rewriting of codes of law, was largely the work of priests. As in Old Europe, this process began with the first androcratic invasions and continued for millennia, as Egypt, Sumer, and all the lands of the Fertile Crescent were gradually transformed into male-dominant and warlike societies. (85)

The proximity of the date (about 400 B.C.E.) of rewriting the Old Testament by the Priestly school and the writing of *Oresteia* (a Greek drama) by Aeschylus, and the similarity between attempts these have made to discredit

women, signify the influence that one exerted on the other. The *Oresteia* denies the right of parenthood to the mother who is depicted as “only the nurse of the new planted seed that grows” (Eisler, *Chalice* 78). The rewritten version of the Old Testament, now current, legitimizes attempts to discredit women and justifies, through stories, their subordination to men. The serpent was also targeted for damnation in the Old Testament because of its association with Goddess worship (Gen. 3:14–15).

None of the Manifestations of God have condoned the degradation of women. Christ admitted women into his presence and treated them honorably. He was kind and equitable even to those who were considered sinners and of a low class. Women served the early Christian Church with devotion and achieved outstanding success. After Christ’s crucifixion, women championed his Cause at home and abroad. The contribution of Mary Magdalene at a time when Christ’s disciples “were wavering and undecided,” although played down in the New Testament, could not be completely ignored. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has confirmed that she was the one “who comforted them and re-established their faith ...” (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 134). The name of Prisca is associated with traveling missionary work. Phoebe had a prominent position in early Christianity. The contribution made by women at the beginning of every religious dispensation has been affirmed in the following excerpt from one of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s tablets:

During the dispensation of every sanctified Manifestation, a number of women were attracted and aroused from the tombs of the material world and were called to the magnificent gathering place of the spirit. They drank their fill from the chalice of the wine of guidance from the hand of the Cupbearer of grace, and received heavenly confirmations from the Revealer of the signs of divine power. Thereafter, with an eloquent speech, a sweet utterance, a fervour, and enthusiasm born of God, they scattered to every corner of the world. (*Makátíb-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 7:217)

The loss of momentum in women’s religious activities after their initial success and their painful absence from the scene of epoch-making events attest to arbitrary restrictions introduced to curtail their work when past religions emerged from obscurity. By eliminating half of humanity from the arena of recognized leadership and authoritative religious activity, men gained ascendancy and assumed full authority over the other half. The status of women in Christianity suffered a setback when the letters of St. Paul were used to sanction women’s silence. Women were barred from teaching and prohibited from assuming authority over men (I Tim. 2:11). If women were in fact intrinsically inferior to men, as men have asserted, elaborate schemes would not have had to be devised and implemented to prove inferiority. St. Paul advocated a break with the past in his approach to teaching the new creed, but when it came to women, he invoked the story of creation and used it to keep women subservient to men.

The Prophet Muhammad introduced improvements to upgrade women’s status. He, in fact, retold the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise and introduced Eblis (a male angel) as the cause. He also specified that Adam was first tempted and deceived (Qur’án 20: 118). But the stigma attached to Eve and the serpent did not disappear. The improvements that Muhammad intended to effect in the status of women eroded in his own lifetime. Men’s misconduct towards women precipitated the introduction of the veil (*hijáb*) that the women “may not be affronted by unseemly words or actions” (Qur’án 33:59). He further said: “Men shall have the pre-eminence above women, because of those advantages wherein God hath caused the one of them to excel the other, and for that which they expend of their substance in maintaining their wives” (Qur’án 4:35). The Prophet of Islam did not specify what the advantages were that had caused “one of them to excel the other,” but credited men for “that which they expend of their substance in maintaining their wives.” Many such teachings were taken to sanction in practice men’s assumption of authority over women and resulted in the further degradation of women’s status in Islam. The erosion continued after Muhammad’s passing until women were pushed into oblivion again. In the nineteenth century, the status of women reached its lowest depth.

The reason for the general ineffectiveness of the improvements that were attempted at the beginning of religious dispensations has been attributed to the failure to tackle the original causes of inequality. As long as the causes remain, the danger exists that complete equality will not be achieved. To safeguard against the possibility or even probability of reintroducing inequality into the religious treatment of women, such causes need be identified and eradicated.

Arbitrary Religious Restrictions Compelled Women to Accept Maltreatment

Despite the firm conviction inspired by all religions and admitted by religiously minded people that God’s love and concern for the human race is all-embracing and indiscriminate, it is ironic that religion should have been used as a potent force to deprive women of their human rights. Belief in one God as the Creator of men and women who were meant to be each other’s helpmate, equally responsible for procreation (Gen.1:28), degenerated into belief that God

preferred one sex over the other, that God gave to one the right to wrong the other, that God justified the discrimination of one against the other, that God intervened in favor of one in order to exalt one over the other, and that God became more concerned with the promotion of the interests of one at the cost of degrading the other. A careful analysis of the treatment accorded women in the past reveals clear and evident traces that confirm this distorted form of belief in the Source of our creation. The irony is that men used scripture to degrade women, and women were influenced to believe that men were right. In this way, they silenced the voice of potential objectors. The repeatedly quoted and widely disseminated passages that form the basis of Judea-Christian and Islamic religious bias and discrimination against women testify to the truth of this statement. Some such passages are:

... And the rib, which Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman.... And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me.... Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Gen. 2–3)

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression. (1 Tim. 2:11–13)

But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor. 11:3)

Men shall have the preeminence above women.... The honest women are obedient, careful in the absence of their husbands, for that God preserveth them, by committing them to the care and protection of the men. (Qur'án 4:35)

O men fear your Lord who hath created you out of one man, and out of him created his wife.... (Qur'án 4:2)

Bahá'u'lláh has referred to beliefs that created distinctions between men and women as “vain imaginings” and “idle fancies.” He says:

Praised be God, the Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens, and, ... conferred upon all a station and rank of the same plane. He hath broken the back of vain imaginings with the sword of utterance and hath obliterated the perils of idle fancies through the pervasive power of His might. (*Women 1*)

The Philosophical Basis of Religions Bias against Women

The basis for religious bias against women seems to be philosophical and ideological. It is hard to know with certainty whether interpreted religious teachings influenced the philosophers' minds to consider and to treat women as inferior human beings, or if philosophical suppositions infiltrated the interpretation of religious doctrines. What is clear is the proximity of views expressed by the interpreters of religious law and the philosophical suppositions about women.

One of the most important, most ancient philosophical debates that men have conducted over the centuries and one which has caused women the loss of their intrinsic equal status with men is that of the origin of matter. This controversial subject has been addressed by many renowned male philosophers who have made differing statements about the subject. Their explanations have clearly stemmed from the “divergence of their views and minds,” not that they present “the essence and the fundamentals of philosophy,” which Bahá'u'lláh says, “have emanated from the Prophets” (*Tablets 145*).

Ancient Hermetic and Greek philosophers, when discussing the origin of matter, expressed views about the substance and form of physical beings. These views did not always agree in detail. The disagreement was basically about what represented the essential aspect: the substance or the form. The same argument plagued the minds of Islamic philosophers. Whether the substance or the form was thought to be the essence, one thing remained consistent: The essential, also referred to as the active force, was thought to represent the male; its counterpart, referred to as passive or the recipient, was believed to represent the female. This widespread theory was then used by alchemists to represent the component elements in composition, which they grouped into two categories: active and passive. They called the active, the male; the passive, the female.³

The first known philosopher who spoke of “active” and “passive” terms seems to be Aristotle. He used these terms when discussing the soul and mind. In the fifth chapter of Book III of “*De Anima*,” we read:

Since in every class of things, as in nature as a whole, we find two factors involved, (1) a matter which is potentially all the particulars included in the class, (2) a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all (the latter standing to the former, as e.g., as art to its material), these distinct elements must likewise be found within the soul.

And in fact mind is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is a sort of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential colours into actual colours.

Mind in this sense of it is separable, impassable, unmixed, since it is in its essential nature activity (for always the active is superior to the passive factor, the originating force to the matter which it forms). (*The Works of Aristotle* 1:662)

In the first chapter of Book IV of "Meteorology," Aristotle explains that "the qualities that constitute the elements are four. ... Two of the qualities, the hot and the cold, are active; two, the dry and the moist, passive" (*The Works of Aristotle* 1:482).

Aristotle also condoned slavery and the rule of the male over the female when he said: "It is a general law that there should be naturally ruling elements and elements naturally ruled," and added that "the rule of the freeman: over the slave is one kind of rule; that of the male over the female another" (qtd. In Deckard, *The Women's Movement* 1).

Aristotle's theory of the active and the passive occupied the minds of many philosophers after him. Islam did not remain immune from his influences either. The translation of Aristotle's works into Arabic paved the way for the Islamic philosophers' study of his philosophy and the further development of his theory. Among renowned philosophers attracted by Aristotle's theory were Al-Kindi, Ibn Rushd, Fakhr-i-Razi, and Ibn Sina. In fact, the theory is still current in some circles. As the theory has undermined women, it is vitally important for us to know, in the interest of the principles of gender equality and oneness of humanity, how it was developed by Islamic philosophers, and why the terminology they employed has been introduced in Bahá'í writings.

Al-Kindi (801?-873?), an Islamic philosopher, "was fond of applying mathematics not only in physics, but also in medicine, e.g., in the theory of composite medicines. He explained the effect of these medicines from the geometrical proportions of the mixture of physical qualities, warm, cold, dry or moist ..." (E. J. Brill, *First Encyclopedia of Islam* 4:1019). The elements that represent these qualities are also four. They are: fire, air, earth, and water. The four qualities and the four elements have each been divided into two: The active, comprising two, and the passive, also comprising two. Alchemists, who have been engaged for centuries in discovering the elixir believed to be capable of transmuting metal into gold, adopted the terminology and used the four basic elements in developing alchemy. In explaining the relationship of the elements to each other, they identified the active elements with the male and the passive with the female. Thus, the foundation of the theory laid earlier by Greek philosophers regarding women as inferior human beings was strengthened.

The Use of the Active Force and its Recipient in Bahá'í Writings

In the Bahá'í Faith, the principle of the equality of men and women negates discriminatory theories and practices. However, since no one is totally immune from the influence of outworn philosophies, it is important that the question be tackled with candor, lest remnants of a prejudicial theory infiltrate our way of thinking and rekindle an old issue. This is particularly important because Bahá'u'lláh in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* (Tablet of Wisdom), revealed in response to an inquirer's question, has referred to the active force and its recipient. Also, in his writings revealed in response to inquiries regarding alchemy, Bahá'u'lláh has mentioned the four elements. Concerning the active force and its recipient he says:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different. Thus doth the Great Announcement inform thee about this glorious structure. Such as communicate the generating influence and such as receive its impact are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God which is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof. Verily thy Lord is the Expounder, the All-Wise. (*Tablets* 140)

In this passage Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the sameness, as well as the difference, of "the active force and that which is its recipient." Thus far men have dwelt upon and emphasized the "different" aspect, which has also been interpreted hierarchically. In the interest of the Bahá'í principles of gender equality and the oneness of humankind,

attention needs be directed to the fact that “these two are the same,” which precedes the phrase “yet they are different.”

Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis that the two are the same indicates that each is endowed with the potential to act in an active *and* passive capacity. This capability represents their sameness. Yet, because each can act, depending on the need and circumstances of the action, either as an active or passive force, they are different. His reference to *al-fá'ilayn* (the twin active agents) and *al-munfa'ilayn* (the twin passive agents) in the same tablet supports this assumption. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablet, explaining the two terms, further confirms this deduction:

the substance and primary matter of contingent beings is the ethereal power.... This ethereal substance is itself both the active force and the recipient.... The ethereal substance is, therefore, the cause since light, heat, and electricity appear from it. It is also the effect, for as vibrations take place in it, they become visible. For instance, light is a vibration occurring in that ethereal substance. (*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 2:69, quoted in Brown, “A Bahá'í Perspective” 28)

'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation above validates the statement made by Socrates:

Between the members of every pair of opposites, since they are two, aren't there two processes of coming-to-be, from one to the other, and back again from the latter to the former? (Qtd. in Brown, “A Bahá'í Perspective” 27)

If the “different” aspect of the two forces be emphasized, a convincing explanation needs to be provided regarding the “Essence,” which is the “Originator” and “Creator” of the two, a Source representing both. For, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in *Some Answered Questions*, the whole cannot lack that which is found in the part. The capacity to be the “recipient,” when it comes to the Essence of creation, cannot be different from being the “active force,” for otherwise duality in the Essence is contemplated. Regarding “the mysteries of distinction and unity,” Bahá'u'lláh says:

... if it be said that all the days are but one and the same, it is correct and true. And if it be said, with respect to their particular names and designations, that they differ, that again is true. For, though they are the same, yet one doth recognize in each a separate designation, a specific attribute, a particular character. (*Gleanings* 22)

Since belief in true unity necessitates the admission that God is Identified with God's names and attributes in the station of God's hidden Essence, and that God's love for God's Own Self is the source of all fervor and the generator of the heat which is the originator of all beings in the universe, then the sameness aspect of the forces that operate in creation is easily understood. Also, by having the active force and its recipient each acting in both capacities, we find a plausible explanation for the “twin active agents” and the “twin passive agents,” an explanation that also complies with the basic tenet of equality.

Accordingly, while God is an all-encompassing Essence, the Manifestations, in relation to God are the recipients of God's generating force, but in relation to the human race, they act as conveyors of that force. This means that they are simultaneously an active and a passive force, passive in relation to God and active in relation to humanity. In a like manner, the whole of humanity acts in the capacity of recipient in relation to the Manifestations of God, but in relation to the lower kingdoms it represents the active force. The sex of the Manifestations of God is a physical phenomenon, unrelated to the sexless spiritual reality they represent, a reality known as the Word of God or the Primal Will. Each Manifestation of God is, therefore, both *al-fá'il* and *al-munfa'il*—so is humanity as a whole.

The assumption that the male sex represents the active force in creation seems to stem from the idea that in procreation it is the decisive factor. The accumulated body of scientific proof indicates that the woman's egg cell is as important a factor in conception as is the man's sperm, and that only woman can provide for the gestation of the embryo. The assumption that man represented the active force in procreation was based on the old belief that the only function the woman performed was that of being a recipient, that she only nursed the newly planted seed.

Not only is the woman an equally important and decisive factor in procreation, she is also the sole bearer and nurturer for nine months of the life of which she is a co-creator. During pregnancy the mother is the sole controller of the destiny of the embryo, which she helps to grow into a viable human being. During this time, the male is merely an onlooker. After birth, the infant continues for some time to depend for survival on its mother. Despite all this, the male alone was considered by some as the giver of life and the generator of influence.

Moreover, the creation of a human being from the rib of another human being is, of course, scientifically nonsensical and in contradiction with the Bahá'í principle of harmony between religion and science. Therefore, the literal belief in the myth that woman was created from the rib of Adam cannot be used as a justification for degrading her. Those who innocently believe what a biased tradition has taught them will only forestall the advancement of humankind. No enlightened believer in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation will accept a prejudicial interpretation of the holy text. Had Bahá'u'lláh and his authorized interpreters desired to emphasize the superiority of men, they would have done so without any impediment. Women, under the influence of old religious tradition and practice, would have been better prepared to accept such pronouncements at the beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation. But this was not the case. The coming of age of the human race requires humankind's knowledge and admission of the truth which must prevail.

The Bahá'í sacred writings testify to the singleness of God and to the exaltation of the divine Essence above all physical attributes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained that when the light of truth shines in the lamp of singleness, the Lover and the Beloved become one, and the pervasive influence of oneness is such that one cannot distinguish the Lover from the one who is Beloved (*Ma'idiy-i Ásmání* 5:19).

Since the divine Essence is unknowable and far beyond the imagination and comprehension of human beings and since the Manifestations of God have not attributed a sex to that Essence, it would be improper for human beings to do so. The Manifestations of God have spoken according to the capacity and level of understanding of the people among whom they have appeared. Their use of the terminology current among the people of their time should be understood in light of the basic principles they have enunciated. Such principles should not be compromised to justify and retain the outworn philosophical suppositions and theories.

The Linguistic Basis of Religious Bias towards Women

The use of biased language has perpetuated the plight of women in religion and society. Language, a conventional medium of communication, subject to interpolation and interpretation, as well as the chief means for conveying divine precepts, has been used to degrade womankind. The inability of the generality of women in the past, because of a lack of education, either to perceive the process or to seek remedy when arbitrary changes were introduced in language, has prolonged the detrimental effects of all biased languages. The preparation of a favorable ground and reassuring atmosphere for the establishment of the unity of humankind requires serious inquiry into the genesis of the adoption of a sexist language. Since revelators of Scripture have had to use the language of the people among whom they have appeared, and because such languages contain biases that have prevented women from attaining the equality Bahá'u'lláh came to establish, it is important that we be aware of this potent cause of inequality and inequity.

Due to the research carried out recently by experts⁴ in the field of women's studies, we are much closer now than ever before to the discovery of trends in the way language has been used to serve the cause of the masculine half of humanity. Such studies include the examination of the original language in which the Torah was revealed and reinterpretation of archeological evidence supported by Gnostic literature and the Nag Hammadi Library⁵ uncovered in Egypt in the twentieth century. According to Carol Meyers:

... the God of Israel, in sharp contrast to the gods of all other contemporaneous religions, was perceived ... as asexual. Moreover, when God had to be described metaphorically, both male and female imagery was used. The prominence of God as father is a very late development in Israelite religion ... and makes only rare appearances in the Hebrew Bible itself (the term "father" is used in association with God just ten times). (Qtd. by Murphy, "Women and the Bible" 54)

Unfortunately for women, in the seventeenth century A.D. when the standard English translation of the Bible (the Old and New Testaments) was being prepared, the process of legitimizing the adoption of a sexist language in Scripture was sealed. Thereafter, the prescriptive grammarians decreed the use of unisex pronouns incorrect. Consequently, the use of an inclusive language gave way to that of the gender-exclusive language prevalent today. The adoption of this linguistic innovation went unchallenged, for women had been deprived of acquiring the expertise that would have equipped them to detect and seek remedy for such a detrimental development. The English translation of the Bible reflected the biases of the version that had already undergone changes to reflect the ascendancy of males over females. The English style used for the translation of the holy book found wide acceptance for several centuries. Recently, that style has been challenged, and new translations have been published to reflect the more inclusive nature of the scriptures in their original languages.

Language has the capacity to convey meanings other than those traditionally assigned to words. This capacity had been previously exploited fully in every respect except that of promoting gender equality. When

Abraham abolished idolatry and taught the people to worship the one true God, he used a familiar language to convey new concepts. When Muhammad appeared, he used the language of the pagans to convey the precepts of his Revelation. The Islamic nation has used the new terminology regardless of what the original words meant or conveyed. This proves that modifications to language to accommodate the needs of the time can be made. The reason this possibility has not been exploited to foster gender equality may be attributed to the ongoing traditional aversion the generality of people manifest towards establishing genuine equality between women and men. For this reason, the use of language still reflects old discriminatory attitudes towards women. The continuation of linguistic biases in religious literature will, no doubt, adversely affect the status of women in centuries to come unless effective steps are taken to highlight the potential dangers they contain, followed by conscientious efforts to eliminate their effects.

The undermining effect of sexist languages, English included, is most apparent in the deliberate attempt to use, without distinction, masculine terms in both the generic and specific senses. The indistinctness of such terms in religious scriptures has been the main cause of misunderstanding regarding the status of women. The interpreters of religious scripture-men in the past had reserved this function as their exclusive prerogative-have made such terms to appear generic or specific according to what their interests have dictated. Terms such as "Father," "Lord," "King," "He," "Him," "His," and other such words, purportedly generic in meaning, were used to refer to God. The initial chapter of Genesis stated that man was created in the image of God, and then immediately specified that male and female were thus created (1 :27). The image of God was therefore represented by the two component parts of humanity. Since God is unknown and unknowable in Essence, since the identity of God does not resemble a human being, male or female, and since God has no corporeal existence, logically no argument should have been advanced to the contrary. However, because the word *man* is both generic in its meaning and is also used to refer specifically to the male half of humanity, problems arose in which we are still entangled today. The indistinctive use of the word over many centuries focused attention on the male and resulted in identifying Gael with masculinity. Consequently, terms such as "Fashioner," "Creator," "Nurturer," "Consoler," "Possessor," "Beloved," and "Friend," which are indeed generic and are used frequently in Bahá'í writings, especially those revealed in the non-gender-specific Persian language, lost the emphasis they deserved when they were translated into English.

Those who entertain the notion that God's masculine attributes are predominant cite in support of their belief the exclusively male gender of the Manifestations of God whom history has recorded thus far. However, the maleness of the Manifestations of God is unrelated to the spirit they manifest, which is sexless. Bahá'u'lláh has referred to the Manifestations of God as "this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being" to whom God "hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God ..." (*Gleanings* 66). The, "ethereal substance," 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "is itself both the active force and the recipient ..." (*Má'idy-i-Asmání* 2:69, qtd. in Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective" 28).

Upon the Manifestations of God, Bahá'u'lláh says, a double station has been conferred: "The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself..."⁶ This is the station in which "the Lover and the Beloved are joined together and made one ..." (*Gleanings* 66-67).

Regarding the identity of God 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

That Essence of the Divine Entity and the Unseen of the unseen is holy above imagination and is beyond thought. Consciousness doth not reach It.... It is a different world; from it there is no information; arrival thereat is impossible; attainment thereto is prohibited and inaccessible. This much is known: It exists and Its existence is certain and proven-but the condition is unknown. (*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 3:562)

To prepare the believers to accept God's decree, whatever it may be, and warning those who delimit God's authority to that which their limited minds conceive and their desires dictate, Bahá'u'lláh says:

...were He to pronounce one of the leaves⁷ to be the manifestation of all His excellent titles, unto no one is given the right to utter why or wherefore, and should one do so he would be regarded as a disbeliever in God and be numbered with such as have repudiated His Truth. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 185)

The arguments advanced in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that women cannot be kings and judges, that they cannot be ordained, that they cannot rule over men and, therefore, cannot become Manifestations of God, are the byproducts of linguistic shortcomings and of the way the laws of the holy books have been interpreted in light of language-related ambiguities. The controversy continues to the present. Historical evidence showing women serving in such capacities is looked upon as examples of exceptions to the rule and, therefore, deemed insufficient to

convince the majority of humanity that women and men are equal human beings entitled to the same rights, privileges, and opportunities.

Regardless of any merit that arguments in defence of using masculine terms in both a generic and a specific sense might have, unless we distinguish at the outset where such terms should be understood in the generic sense and where in the specific, the specifically masculine meaning that the generality of people attach to such terms will remain a significant factor in perpetuating gender inequality. And as long as linguistic biases and shortcomings, which have contributed to the general degradation of women in the past, are accommodated, the difficulties created by those biases will continue. This is indeed a dilemma and paradox that, unless obliterated through conscientious effort, may remain with us until the dawn of the adoption of a universal language, which, it is hoped, will be free from the dividing effects of the sexist languages.

A cursory look at the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (the Most Holy Book) reveals the trend apparent in Scriptures of the past. General statements in the Most Holy Book are worded in terms that, although generic in meaning, are masculine in form. For example, where Bahá'u'lláh addresses the “men of understanding” (20), and the “men of insight” (21), or speaks of the establishment of “the truth of the laws of God amongst men” (22), or says “regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection” (63), he is addressing humanity in general. In fact, when a mixed group of males and females are addressed in Arabic, masculine terms are generally used.⁸

The laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are revealed in a similar style. Many examples can be cited as evidence. For instance, Bahá'u'lláh decrees “exile and imprisonment ... for the thief” and says, “on the third offence, place ye a mark upon his brow so that, thus identified, he may not be accepted in the cities of God and His countries” (35–36). He also says: “Should resentment or antipathy arise between husband and wife, he is not to divorce her but to bide in patience throughout the course of one whole year ...” (43). Shoghi Effendi has made it clear that such laws apply to men and women alike. The Universal House of Justice, on the basis of Shoghi Effendi's interpretation, has concluded that

where Bahá'u'lláh has given a law as between a man and a woman, it applies *mutatis mutandis* between a woman and a man unless the context makes this impossible. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 7)

The implications of this principle are far reaching; it includes, for example, the right of both sides to marriage to condition it upon virginity.

Passages addressed to specific groups of people in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* are also worded in masculine terms. Bahá'u'lláh addresses the sovereigns as kings (48–49). He recounts “the blessedness that awaiteth the king who will arise to aid My Cause in My kingdom who will detach himself from all else but Me!” (50). Regarding the “learned ones in Bahá,” he says: “Ye are the manifestations of steadfastness amidst men and the daysprings of Divine Utterance to all that dwell on earth” (82).

One of the sovereigns specifically addressed by Bahá'u'lláh was Queen Victoria.⁹ Ironically, she was the only ruling monarch who “it is said, upon reading the Tablet revealed for her remarked: ‘If this is of God, it will endure; if not, it can do no harm’” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 65). Bahá'u'lláh praised her for forbidding “the trading in slaves” and said: “This, verily, is what God hath enjoined in this wondrous Revelation. God hath, truly destined a reward for thee, because of this” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 35). She was also praised for having “entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well, for thereby the foundations of the edifice of thine affairs will be strengthened, and the hearts of all that are beneath thy shadow, whether high or low, will be tranquilized” (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 35–36). Bahá'u'lláh's commendation of Queen Victoria and Shoghi Effendi's statement, indicating that she did not reject out of hand Bahá'u'lláh's claim and his tablet, are clear testimonies that she occupied a special place among the sovereigns of her time.

Regarding the learned, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi appointed both male and female Hands of the Cause, and the Universal House of Justice has appointed Counsellors from among Bahá'í men and women. The members of the appointed institution, i.e., the Hands of the Cause of God, the Counsellors, and those appointed to assist them in their work, together with those teachers who achieve prominence in the teaching work, constitute the learned in the Bahá'í Faith.

The purpose of the above illustrations is to show that a hasty and superficial understanding of the language in which the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has been revealed would have been very difficult to challenge, even in this enlightened age, if Bahá'u'lláh had not provided safeguards against misrepresentation of his laws and teachings by unauthorized interpreters. Another helpful factor has been the body of his writings revealed in Persian (a non-gender-specific language).

Bahá'u'lláh used both Persian and Arabic to convey to humanity the gems of his Revelation. He spoke in the languages of the people among whom he appeared. This was the only way to make his Revelation understood. While Persian is a language without grammatical gender and thus is less liable to sexist interpretation, in Arabic, every word is associated with a gender. This applies even to the inanimate objects. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has been revealed in Arabic and, generally speaking, except for a few instances where women have been specifically mentioned, the language of the text makes it appear as if it were primarily revealed for men. A literal translation would naturally convey the same impression.

While a sizable proportion of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, including many conveying the laws of his Dispensation and answers to questions regarding the laws, is in the ungendered Persian language, they appear sexist when they are translated into English. When Shoghi Effendi undertook the translation of select passages from the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* about fifty years ago, the traditional linguistic style of English used by translators of the Bible in the seventeenth century was still the style for rendering scripture in that language. The adoption of that style, therefore, determined the way in which the translation of the "Most Holy Book," "Questions and Answers" (an appendix to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*), and the notes have been prepared. The immensity of the undertaking warrants a thorough study of solutions that can deal successfully with the effects of a gendered language into which the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, itself revealed in a gendered language, has been translated.

Bahá'u'lláh, untroubled by grammarians' rules, repeatedly referred to himself in feminine terms and has, without hesitation, used feminine pronouns in reference to himself. One such term is "*Varqá*," translated as Nightingale or Dove. This term and its accompanying pronouns have also been used in the "Most Holy Book." However, because it is uncommon in English to use feminine pronouns in relation to the Manifestation of God, Shoghi Effendi used the neuter instead:

When the Mystic Dove [*Varqá*] will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock, (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 82)

The translation of the remaining passages of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is done in a style similar to that of Shoghi Effendi. In the following passage, feminine pronouns have likewise been changed to neuter:

Thus hath the Nightingale [*Varqá*] sung with sweet melody upon the celestial bough, in praise of its Lord, the All-Merciful. Well is it with them that hearken, (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 70)

In his writings, Bahá'u'lláh has occasionally used masculine pronouns referring to himself as "Nightingale," "Dove," "Bird of Holiness," and so forth. Wherever he used masculine pronouns, they were retained in translation. One such instance occurs in the verse in the Tablet of Ahmad, which says, "Thus doth the Nightingale utter His call unto you from this prison" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 210). This clearly indicates the extent to which linguistic biases and style can determine the nuances of a language. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was acutely aware of the present linguistic defects when he said:

... no one person can construct a Universal Language. It must be made by a Council representing all countries, and must contain words from different languages. It will be governed by the simplest rules, and there will be no exceptions; neither will there be gender, nor extra and silent letters. Everything indicated will have but one name. (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 95)

Reasons for the Use of Antiquated Terminology and Theories in the Bahá'í Writings

One reason for the occasional use of antiquated terminology in Bahá'í literature is that early believers asked Bahá'u'lláh about alchemy, also referred to as "the concealed science." In a tablet in which he explained in detail the use of different elements and their composition, Bahá'u'lláh used the terminology prevalent among the people of his time and background. Such terminology used in tablets with specific theme and application is likely to be used as evidence by scholars and writers as basis for speculation that in creation and in the Bahá'í Faith, men represent the active force and women the recipient. Bahá'u'lláh specifies in one of his tablets, as yet untranslated and unpublished, that the Faith of God is not made of the four elements, that it is a unique mystery, an ancient essence, an eternal gem, and a hidden identity. It is neither composed of the four elements stated by the philosophers, nor made of the four qualities. These are all created at God's behest and come into being through God's Will, Bahá'u'lláh says.

References can be found in a few other instances which, if viewed in isolation from categorical statements about the equality of men and women, could be interpreted as confirming the notion of one sex representing the active force and the other its recipient. These include ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s description of the symbol of the Greatest Name in which he likens the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh to Eve and Adam, and Shoghi Effendi’s reference in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* which says:

The Will may thus be acclaimed as the inevitable offspring resulting from that mystic intercourse between Him Who communicated the generating influence of His divine Purpose and the One Who was its vehicle and chosen recipient. Being the Child of the Covenant—the Heir of both the Originator and the Interpreter of the Law of God the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can no more be divorced from Him Who supplied the original and motivating impulse than from the One Who ultimately conceived it. (144)

These are metaphors used to facilitate the understanding of people familiar with certain terminology. Similar metaphors exist in the Bahá’í writings. Consider, for example, Bahá’u’lláh’s use of “the fourth heaven” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 89) in connection with the ascension of Jesus Christ. Shoghi Effendi has confirmed that it does not exist in reality.¹⁰ If the use of this and other metaphors have not beclouded our understanding of truths enshrined in Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, why should we allow their use regarding the active force and its recipient to confuse our minds regarding the reality of the principle of the equality of men and women?

We need be aware also of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement in the Tablet to the Physician (*Lawh-i-Tibb*), not yet translated into English, which, if viewed superficially, would appear to contradict other statements in the writings about women. In that tablet, Bahá’u’lláh explains the merits of wisdom, utterance, and steadfastness in the Cause of God and their indispensability for the success of the teaching work. He then speaks of fear and anxiety to be the attributes of women and admonishes the friends to ponder upon the world and the differences manifested therein that they may not fear the oppressors’ might and may soar high towards Him on the wings of enthusiasm (*Majmú’iy-i-Alváh-i-Hadrat-i-Bahá’u’lláh* 225–26). Anyone intent on keeping women under the thumb of men’s authority could use this in isolation from other statements of Bahá’u’lláh to support their position. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s testimony, Bahá’u’lláh has called many women, who arose fearlessly to serve him, the pride of men. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also pointed out that “among the miracles which distinguish this sacred Dispensation is this, that women have evinced a greater boldness than men when enlisted in the ranks of the Faith” (qtd. in *The Advent of Divine Justice* 69).

What is then meant by Bahá’u’lláh’s statement? Does it provide a justifiable pretext for disqualifying women from activities requiring courage and steadfastness? Unless one is familiar with the causes of women’s fear and anxiety, one is unable to comprehend its meaning.

Women were reared in the past to depend on men for their livelihood and survival. Their understanding of matters of belief, involvement in public affairs, exercise of rights of decision-making, and the expression of their views in matters that affected their lives were limited to what men considered appropriate for them. They were generally deprived of education and could not be gainfully employed. The circumstances of their lives over which they had no control often made them slaves, fully subservient to men. Under such conditions, any human being would be fearful and anxious. Bahá’u’lláh was speaking in the language of the people of his time and used expressions known to and believed by them. The success of multitudes of fearless women in the East and the West in teaching the Cause of God with wisdom, utterance, and steadfastness is a mighty proof that women match the most heroic men in their fearlessness and courage. Bahá’u’lláh, speaking of his female followers, says:

Throughout the centuries and ages many a man hath waited expectant for God’s Revelation, and yet when the Light shone forth from the horizon of the world, all but a few turned their faces away from it. Whosoever from amongst the handmaidens hath recognized the Lord of all Names is recorded in the Book as one of those men by the Pen of the Most High. (*Women* 3)

Assumptions made by scholars circulate widely and have the capacity to resurrect those old beliefs that run counter to the interests of a united humanity. The statement of Shoghi Effendi in “The Goal of a New World Order” is a sufficient warning:

If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. (*The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 42)

Reflection

Recent studies attempting to determine people's religiosity have confirmed that women in general are more religious than men. The author of the article "Beneath the Status Characteristic: Gender Variations in Religiousness"¹¹ argues that it is the feminine outlook rather than femininity itself that accounts for people's religiousness. A feminine outlook is something that can be shared by both women and men, he says. If the premise is correct, it could explain why spiritual leaders in the past made attempts at restricting women's activities through the imposition of arbitrary injunctions and fabricated stories to degrade their status in religion. It could also explain the rationale for disciplinary laws made incumbent on men, such as the law of pilgrimage, from which women are exempt.

Another article "With Justice and Mercy: Instrumental-Masculine and Expressive-Feminine Elements in Religion"¹² explains that when a religion is obscure and oppressed, it focuses on what they call the feminine attributes of God, such as mercy. Emergence from obscurity is usually accompanied by a shift in emphasis, introducing hierarchy and focusing on qualities that are considered masculine. The shift happens when a religion enjoys emancipation, the authors observe. Women do well generally at the beginning of religious dispensations but are pushed back and replaced by men when masculine attributes prevail.

One may ask, Is this pattern capable of repeating itself in this day and age? A number of reasons could be given in support of a firm negative response, the most potent of which are:

- First, male superiority, accommodated in scriptures of the past, has been annulled in the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh has revealed the principle of the equality of the sexes, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has emphasized that "in all human powers and functions they are partners and coequals" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 136).

- Second, the "fundamental object" of the Universal House of Justice "is to ... safeguard the unity" of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, and "to maintain the integrity and flexibility" of the teachings of his Faith (*Constitution* 4). The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, therefore, will not suffer the fate of the religions of the past.

- Third, universal peace, a prelude to world unity that *is* a pivotal principle of the Bahá'í Faith, will be established when women achieve full equality and partnership with men (*The Promise of World Peace: To the Peoples of the World* 26–27). Since global unity is the ultimate goal of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, gender equality will remain the most crucial prerequisite for its establishment and preservation.

- Fourth, the notion of the complementarity of roles and functions, which was used in the past to confine women to the home and keep them away from the arena of public affairs, has been redefined in the Bahá'í Faith to enable women to participate in all human activities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

In the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, women are advancing side by side with men. There is no area or instance where they will lag behind: they have equal rights with men, and will enter, in the future, into all branches of the administration of society. Such will be their elevation that, in every area of endeavour, they will occupy the highest levels in the human world.... (*Women* 34, cf. *Paris Talks* 182)

He also says:

So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease.... (*Promulgation* 135)

- Fifth, education in the Bahá'í Faith is both compulsory and universal. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 175). If a family's financial resources are insufficient to educate both the girl and the boy, priority is given to the girl's education (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 199–200). Considering that the scheme of women's degradation in the past was based on depriving them of the blessing of education, the revolutionary nature of this law becomes evident.

- Sixth, ruling by force is losing its appeal; aggression is no longer a criterion for the assumption of a superior role: "... the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced" (*Women* 11–12). Therefore, emergence from obscurity does not mean the reintroduction of a system in which men thrive and women lose their rights.

Conclusion

God created human beings equal; men and women alike were created in God's image and likeness. Bahá'u'lláh has emphasized that "women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God" (*Women* 21). However, the basic tenet of equality suffered a setback when women's rights were undermined and their subjugation justified. The striking similarity that exists between mythical beliefs predating the rewriting of the Old Testament and certain

passages in religious scripture regarding creation, as well as philosophical suppositions current at the time suggests that one influenced the other. More striking is the use of language to serve and promote inequality of the sexes, which gradually turned into an ideology adversely affecting the lives of one half of humanity. Now that scientific research and objective inquiry are employed to unravel the truths suppressed for so many centuries, humanity is becoming increasingly aware of the pitfalls that plagued its past. This is one of the indirect influences of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and a welcome development at this juncture of human evolution. For, Bahá'u'lláh, the inaugurator of this enlightened era of equity and justice, has categorically pronounced the principle of the equality of women and men, and has restored to women the rights that had been denied them for countless centuries. The coming of age of the human race destined to take place in this age is marked by the realization of facts that had been distorted, misrepresented, and misjudged in the annals of religions. Bahá'u'lláh has come to establish a New World Order and to create an equilibrium too long out of balance. The ultimate goal of that Order is the establishment of universal peace and attainment of oneness of humanity, the prerequisite of which is gender equality. To achieve a meaningful unity unthreatened by fears of one sex dominating the other, past mistakes need be identified and safeguards introduced to forestall their repetition. Taking a serious look at the philosophy and language of gender inequality will help close the gap separating us from achieving true equality and will go far towards the realization of that objective.

Notes

1. In authorized translations of the Bahá'í writings into English, the masculine pronoun used for God and the Prophets is a generic term. Unfortunately, this term is generally also used to refer specifically to the male half of humanity. This has worked to women's disadvantage. In the Persian language, which is one of the two languages of Revelation in the Bahá'í Faith, the pronoun "Ú" spelled "oo" in some sources, is used to refer to the third-person singular, be it a woman, a man, or a Prophet. The same pronoun is used to refer to God.
2. For further information, see *The Dartmouth Bible*.
3. Cf. Keven Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective on the Origin of Matter," and Ross Woodman, "The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith."
4. See Deckard, "The Women's Movement" 7–8, and Strainchamps, "Our Sexist Language."
5. The Nag Hammadi Library consists of Coptic translations of works originally written in Greek during the early Christian era. The translated works were brought to light in 1945. See Murphy, "Women and the Bible."
6. See note 1.
7. In Bahá'í terminology, the word *leaves* is synonymous with handmaidens (females).
8. This trend is not peculiar to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*; it is also discernible in other Bahá'í writings. In *The Hidden Words*, for example, Bahá'u'lláh addresses humanity in masculine forms. Passages addressed to "Son of Spirit," "Son of Existence," and so forth refer to humanity as a whole.
9. The first member of royalty who espoused Bahá'u'lláh's Cause was also a woman. She was Queen Marie of Romania, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria.
10. Letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in Persian dated 4 September 1929 and in Arabic dated 23 February 1945, quoted in *Payám-i-Bahá'í* 145:24.
11. By Edward H. Thompson, Jr., published in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30.4 (1991): 381–94.
12. By Eugen Schoenfeld and Stjepan G. Mestrovic, published in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30.4 (1991): 363–80.

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