

**“I NEVER UNDERSTOOD ANY OF THIS FROM ‘ABBĀS  
EFFENDI:” MUḤAMMAD ‘ABDUH’S KNOWLEDGE OF  
THE BAHĀ’Ī TEACHINGS AND HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH  
‘ABDU’L-BAHĀ’ ‘ABBĀS**

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In the field of Islamic reform in the modern era, few figures have commanded the prestige and scholarly attention that has been accorded to Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905). Born in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘Abduh rose from humble origins to attend the premier institution of Muslim learning, al-Azhar, engage in a brilliant career in journalism, participate in a revolt, and attain to the highest religious office in Egypt, that of Grand Mufti, in the twilight of his life. Many of his intellectual influences are well known, including his Ṣūfī uncle, Shaykh Darwīsh, and the itinerate revolutionary Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī. The latter enigmatic figure directed his disciple toward a career in journalism, and only months after Afghānī’s arrival in Egypt in 1876, ‘Abduh wrote an article for the first issue of *al-Ahrām* (September 3, 1876), the prominent Egyptian periodical. Afghānī also gathered a small circle of students from al-Azhar, many of whom went on to noteworthy political careers.

‘Abduh, the most prominent of this group, graduated from Azhar in 1877 and received a teaching position at the newly opened Dār al-‘Ulūm of Al-Azhar in 1878. During this period of time Khedive Tawfiq Pasha expelled Afghānī from Egypt in 1879 for his political machinations, and ‘Abduh was temporarily placed under house arrest. In 1880, ‘Abduh was appointed editor of *al-Waqā’i’ l-Miṣrīyya*, a government journal that he infused with new life, writing numerous essays on education and social reform. Following in his teacher’s footsteps, he reluctantly supported the ‘Urābī Revolt, which was subsequently crushed by the British, and led to foreign occupation of Egypt and the exile of ‘Abduh for three years. In January 1883 he left Egypt for Beirut to begin his exile. After a year in Beirut, Afghānī asked ‘Abduh to join him in Paris. Once there, the two formed a secret society, “*al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā*,” and published a periodical by the same name, as a means of resisting colonial

incursion into the Muslim world. ‘Abduh penned most of the articles at Afghānī’s direction. The periodical lasted only seven months, but received a great deal of attention for its literary style and themes. Its political radicalism and call for revolution also attracted the attention of the British government, which blocked its import into India and Egypt.

‘Abduh returned to Beirut at the beginning of 1885, where he remained for three years. In 1888 Lord Cromer, the British High Commissioner for Egypt, invited him back to the land of his birth, where he rose through a number of government posts until his final appointment as Grand Mufti. The warm reception accorded him by the British government was partially due to fundamental changes in his concepts of social change. Previously, he advocated political revolution as the primary vehicle of development, with education serving a complimentary role. However, he later split with Afghānī and repudiated the revolutionary doctrine of his mentor in favor of evolutionary change predicated upon reforms in education. This was partly due to his disillusionment with the effectiveness of political revolution, which only seemed to replace one form of dictatorial government with another, and his fear of revolt by the rural masses. Democracy, ‘Abduh felt, could only be sustained by a population thoroughly educated in its rights and responsibilities.

At the end of his life, Muḥammad ‘Abduh penned a letter in Arabic to Leo Tolstoy. The aged savant wrote admiringly of the Russian writer’s efforts to reform education and religious thought, reforms that ‘Abduh fought for in the Muslim world throughout his entire adult life. On May 12, 1904, little over a year before the death of ‘Abduh, Leo Tolstoy penned his reply to the Mufti’s letter of greeting. In it, he praised the reformist efforts of his correspondent and ended it by asking the question: “What do you know of the Bāb and Bahā’u’llāh?” Almost one hundred years since the question was asked, it still remains unanswered.

The emergence of several letters exchanged between ‘Abduh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahā’, the son of Bahā’u’llāh and his later designated successor, may provide a meaningful answer for the first time. The correspondence and additional evidence illumines a little known friendship between one of the most influential Muslim intellectuals

of the last two hundred years and the leader of a messianic religious movement that is considered “heretical” by many of the claimants to ‘Abduh’s legacy, who seek to proscribe it in national courts and the court of public opinion. In this paper, I discuss the role of one of these claimants, Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā’ (1865–1935). Born in Greater Syria, Riḍā’ travelled to Cairo in 1897 to study with ‘Abduh. Although Riḍā’ implicitly claimed ‘Abduh’s reformist legacy after the death of his mentor, he became increasingly conservative, as evinced by his later embrace of the ideals of the Wahhābī movement. In addition to his support for the Ottoman Caliphate and nationalist sentiments, Riḍā’ is also known for his religious journal *al-Manār*. As ‘Abduh’s chief disciple, he played the predominant role in shaping his mentor’s legacy.

In this paper, I discuss the various narrative techniques he employed to obfuscate the relationship between ‘Abduh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’. Further, I examine the correspondence between ‘Abduh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ and illustrate the subtle manner in which the latter conveyed his father’s theophanic claims to the Muslim intellectual. Finally, I suggest further avenues of research and indicate the possible existence of additional correspondence between the two men that may shed further light on inter-religious dialogue in the Middle East at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Appearance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’***

It may surprise Western scholars that Riḍā’s history of ‘Abduh is, in reality, “histories” of ‘Abduh, as it contains an amalgam of accounts by his associates and disciples. The challenge of judging the veracity of Riḍā’s account, therefore, is multiplied by the presence of numerous voices. For instance, the Mufti’s exile in Beirut is narrated by three authors: Rashīd Riḍā’, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ, and Shakīb Arslān (two students of ‘Abduh in Beirut). The accounts do not differ significantly in content, recounting ‘Abduh’s lectures at the Sulṭāniyya school in Beirut, his dialogues with various religious leaders, his writing activities, the formation of a secret society for the reconciliation between the three major monotheistic religions, and a frequent stream of visitors to his home. Only on the latter theme does Arslān diverge from the narrative of Riḍā’ and ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ by

noting the appearance of ‘Abbās Effendi (1844–1921) on ‘Abduh 's doorstep:

None of the notables or his acquaintances journeyed to Beirut without coming to greet him [‘Abduh]. He honored and exalted each one and, even if he disagreed with him in belief, he did not cease to respect him. Foremost among those he honored was ‘Abbās Effendi al-Bahā’, leader of the Bābīs, even though the Bābī way is different from what the Shaykh believes and is the creed that as-Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn refuted so strongly. But he revered ‘Abbās Effendi's knowledge, refinement, distinction, and high moral standards and ‘Abbās Effendi similarly honored ‘Abduh ( *Riḍā* 1931:407).

‘Abbās Effendi, more commonly known as ‘Abdu'l-Bahā’, was the son of the founder of the Bahā’ī religion, Mīrzā Ḥusayn ‘Alī (1817–1892), and later designated his successor and expounder of his teachings. The religion is often regarded as a continuation of a religious movement initiated in 1844 by Sayyid ‘Alī Muḥammad (1819–1850), surnamed the Bāb (the Gate) from Shīrāz, Persia, who proclaimed himself the long-awaited return of the Hidden Imam and declared a new religious dispensation abrogating the Qur’ān. Throughout his prodigious writings, he wrote of a coming “manifestation of God” (*mazhar allāh*). This station was later publicly claimed in 1863 by Ḥusayn ‘Alī (one of his followers who adopted the title Bahā’u’llāh), who guided the nascent Bābī community after the execution of the Bāb on July 9, 1850. The majority of the followers of the Bāb subsequently gave their allegiance to Bahā’u’llāh and became known as Bahā’īs.

At the time of his visit to Beirut, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ was a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire in ‘Akkā, Palestine, as a result of his father’s claim to be the recipient of a new revelation from God that abrogated the laws of the Qur’ān. At the core of Bahā’u’llāh's worldview is the belief that the teachings of the various prophets represent a progressive unfoldment of religious truth suited to the exigencies of an ever-advancing society. Claiming to be the latest in this line of prophets and the bearer of a new revelation from God, his teachings emphasized the recognition of the oneness and the interdependence of humanity, which led him to call for the creation of global,

transnational institutions to regulate human affairs. These teachings were later articulated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ during his travels in the West after being freed from Ottoman imprisonment in 1908 following the Young Turk revolution.

Although technically a prisoner, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ was invited to Beirut around 1879 by Midḥat Pāshā (d. 1883), the constitutional reformer and, at that time, governor of Syria. The date of his visit was calculated by Hassan Balyuzi, who notes “According to British consular records, Midḥat Pāshā was Governor-General in Damascus from November 1878 to August 1880. He visited Haifa and “‘Akkā in May 1880.” Balyuzi further asserts that ‘Abduh met ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ during the latter’s visit to Beirut. (Balyuzi 1980:378).

However, ‘Abduh was in Egypt at this time, probably living in exile in his village due to his involvement with Afghānī. There is little doubt, however, that the two actually met, as attested by both Arslān and later by ‘Abduh in a conversation with Ridā’, who asserted that ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ visited frequently during his sojourn in Beirut (Ridā’ 1931:930). We must assume, therefore, that ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ visited Beirut at least a second time, between the years 1884–1888.

### ***Ridā’'s Narrative Treatment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’***

Not content with Arslān’s account of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’'s visit, Ridā’ informs his readers in a footnote that ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ practiced *at-taqīyyah*, or “dissimulation,” and falsely portrayed himself as a Shī’ī reformer, thereby deceiving ‘Abduh. Further, Ridā’ assures his readers that he will clarify ‘Abduh’s relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ in a later section (Ridā’ 1931:307, n.2). Indeed, towards the end of his biography, Ridā’ fulfills his pledge by offering an account of a conversation with ‘Abduh in the summer of 1897 (for translation, see Cole 1981). In framing the conversation, Ridā’ again alleges that his master was not informed of the true nature of the Bahā’ī teachings, the implication being that he would instantly have repudiated ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’.

In his discussion with Ridā’, ‘Abduh does not focus on the religious beliefs of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ but rather on his efforts to change society peacefully through educational reform. At the beginning of their conversation, he professes his ignorance of Bahā’ī teachings but

remarks, “This sect is the only sect that works diligently for the acquisition of the arts and sciences among the Muslims, the ‘ulama’ and the intellectuals” (Ridā’ 1931:930). In the course of their conversation, Ridā’ informs his teacher that ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ denied the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood and affirmed the need for a new revelation from God suited to the exigencies of humanity. ‘Abduh responds that “I never understood any of this from ‘Abbās Effendi. He only explained that they have undertaken to reform the Shī’ite sect and bring it closer to the Sunnis” (Ridā’ 1931:934, translated by Cole 1981). Even if we are reluctant to wholeheartedly accept Ridā’’s account, it is reasonable to presume that ‘Abduh, as a devout Muslim, did not approve of Bahā’ī theology and eschatology. However, I will present new evidence that suggests that he was not entirely forthright with his disciple regarding his knowledge of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’’s “heterodoxy.”

In his article on ‘Abduh and Ridā’’s conversation about the Bahā’ī religion, Juan Cole contends that the Mufti was well informed of the nature of the Bahā’ī religion, although he offers no evidence (1981:8). Thankfully, new material has come to light in the last twenty years that supports Cole’s contention.

It is likely that the Mufti’s initial exposure to the Bahā’ī teachings transpired prior to his meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’. During ‘Abduh’s first period of exile to Beirut in 1883, he and Abu Turāb began to translate Afghānī’s “Refutation of the Materialists,” which contained a highly inflammatory reference to the Bahā’ī teachings. The Persian original contains the following characterization of the “Bābīs” (a term that Afghani used to refer to both followers of the Bāb and Bahā’u’llāh):

Let it be noted that the *Bābīs*, who recently appeared in Iran and iniquitously spilled the blood of thousands of God’s servants, were the apprentices of those same neicheris [naturalists] of Alamut [*Ismailis*] and the slaves, or bearers of begging bowls, of those men of the mountain, and their teachings are an example of bāṭinī teachings. We must anticipate what further effects their beliefs will have among the Iranian people in the future (Keddie 1968:158).

Interestingly, ‘Abduh and Abu Turāb’s translation of the Persian text into Arabic makes no mention of the “Bābīs:”

It is clear that a group (*fi’ah*) has appeared in recent days in some of the Eastern countries that has shed abundant blood and murdered noble souls. It appears under a name that is not far removed from the names of similar movements that preceded it. They picked up the remnants of the materialists (*dahrīyyū*) of Alamut and the naturalists (*Tabī’īyyū*) of Kardkūh and its teachings are like the teachings of the *Bāṭinīs*. We must see what the effect is of its innovations [*bida’*] in the community in which it appeared (Afghānī 1973:167).

Why did ‘Abduh edit out the specific reference to the “Bābīs?” If, as Ridā’ contended, he knew nothing of the movement, what purpose would it serve to substantively alter the imprecations of Afghani's original text? Given the date of the publication of the translation, 1885–86 (Keddie 1972:5), it is possible that ‘Abduh already had a favorable view of the Bahā’īs or at least did not wish to further prejudice Afghānī’s audience against them. Although speculative, this helps explain the curious omission of the name of the “group.”

Further, ‘Abduh characterizes the “Bābī” teachings as *bida’*, which literally means “innovation.” In an Islamic context, the word is the closest equivalent to the English word “heresy.” The use of this word is an advance on Afghani's pejorative statements, which stopped short of accusing the movement of *bida’*. It also indicates that, whether ‘Abduh knew ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ personally by this time or not, he probably thought of the movement as “heretical.” Strikingly, it did not seem to dampen ‘Abduh's eagerness to befriend the “heretic,” as we shall see in the following pages.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that ‘Abduh’s characterization of the Bābī and Bahā’ī teachings as *bida’* derived from knowledge of the teachings themselves. This knowledge was probably gleaned in large part from Afghānī, who nurtured a long-standing enmity toward the Bahā’īs, as evinced by the hostile article attributed to him in Butrus Bustani’s encyclopedia (1876:4–16). Despite his repudiation of the teachings of the Bāb and Bahā’u’llāh,

Afghānī freely associated and intrigued with Azalī Bābīs, who refused to recognize the claims of Bahā'u'llāh and followed his half-brother, Mīrzā Yahyā, who named himself Subh al-Azal (Morn of Eternity). It seems very likely, therefore, that 'Abduh, as Afghānī's closest collaborator, was exposed to his master's prejudices towards the movement. It is puzzling, however, that Riḍā' would assert the ignorance of his mentor despite his knowledge of the close association between 'Abduh and Afghānī during this period of time.

In addition to Riḍā''s contention that 'Abduh was ignorant of the true nature of the Bahā'ī teachings, he also asserts that he dissuaded his master from his favorable opinion of the Bahā'ī religion. However, he offers no evidence of 'Abduh's disaffection other than his own word. It is possible, as Cole notes, that the polemic was intended to exonerate his teacher rather than adhere to the truth (Cole 1981:8–9). As a claimant to 'Abduh's reformist legacy, the public perception of his mentor's association with and admiration for the leader of a "heretical" movement was anathema to Riḍā'. Indeed, Riḍā''s hostility toward the Bahā'ī teachings was kindled as a student in Turabluṣ, where he had read an article on the history of the Bābī and Bahā'ī movements in the secular journal *al-Muqtataf* (Mīrzā Faḍlu'llāh, 1896) penned by Mīrzā Abū'l-Faḍl (1844–1914), a Bahā'ī scholar who began teaching at al-Azhar around 1894–95. Riḍā' was further incensed by the warm reception of Abū'l-Faḍl's book, *ad-Durar al-Bahīyyah (Glorious Pearls)*, by Mustafā Kāmil, an Egyptian nationalist leader, and Shaykh 'Alī Yūsif, owner of the newspaper of *al-Mu'ayyid* (Riḍā' 1931:937). Afraid that the people were being deceived by the Bahā'īs, he later used his periodical, *al-Manār*, as a medium of anti-Bahā'ī polemic (Cole 1983).

#### **'Abduh's Friendship with 'Abdu'l-Bahā'**

From the foregoing, it is clear that Riḍā''s treatment of his mentor's relationship with 'Abdu'l-Bahā' must be viewed with some incredulity. Still, the nature of 'Abduh's friendship with 'Abdu'l-Bahā' and his knowledge of the teachings of the Bahā'ī religion persists. Even though Cole has explored the subject in some detail, he admits that "the matter of how intimate the two men were bears more investigation" (Cole 1981:12). The subject may be clarified by two letters exchanged between 'Abduh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā' that have



recently surfaced. According to an Egyptian Bahā'ī, Salīm Qa'bīn, Muḥammad 'Abduh sent a letter (*kitāb*, which could also mean “book”) to Bahā'u'llāh, to which the latter instructed 'Abdu'l-Bahā' to reply Qa'bīn (1932:125–127). If the letter accompanied a copy of *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqā*, then 'Abdu'l-Bahā's response was written after 1884. Indeed, Bahā'u'llāh notes the receipt of *al-'Urwa* in his “Lawḥ-i Dunyā,” so this is not an unreasonable assumption.

There are two different ways to read the letter (see full translation in Appendix I). One way is to read it as a letter of encouragement, employing typical Muslim punctilios towards this end. For instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahā' opens the letter with a eulogy of the Prophet and his family commonly found in many eighteenth century letters from one learned Muslim to another. The text is permeated with quotes from the Qur'ān, a sign of erudition and well-crafted prose. 'Abdu'l-Bahā' also praises the Mufti's efforts to reform Islam and counsels him to contemplate the dynamism of an earlier age and the activities of the predecessors (*al-aslāf*). Interestingly, 'Abdu'l-Bahā', later the leader of a religious group that claimed to abrogate the laws of Islam, seems to encourage 'Abduh's rationale for reform (even the word associated with 'Abduh's reform movement, *salafiyyah*, comes from the same root as *al-aslāf*).

The friendship between the two men is also evident, as might be inferred from the references to the “attraction of your love and devotion” (*jadibat ḥubbika*) and the “ardor of your friendship” (*shiddat walā'ika*). These indicate that their friendship was already established by the time the letter was written, although a fixed date has yet to be determined.

There is, however, another way to read the letter. Given its general tone, repeated use of Qur'ānic allusions to the station of prophethood, and the employment of uniquely Bahā'ī symbology, 'Abdu'l-Bahā' seems to have subtly hinted at the theophanic claims of his father. He begins the letter with a reference to the “Mystic Dove,” (*al-warqā'*) whose tongue has been loosed by God to speak in Paradise, and to the burning of the Divine Lote-Tree (*as-sidra ar-rabbāniyya*). In his writings, Bahā'u'llāh often identified himself with the *warqā'*, as evident in the following tablet written during his incarceration in Adrianople:

Thus doth the Nightingale [*al-warqā'*] utter His call unto you from this prison. He hath but to deliver this clear message. Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord (Bahā'u'llāh 1982:210–11).

Another symbol Bahā'u'llāh frequently employed to indicate his prophetic station is that of the Burning Bush and the *sidratu'l-muntahā*, the Divine Lote-Tree mentioned in the Qur'ān, as evinced in the following letter to one of his enemies:

Open thine eyes that thou mayest behold this Wronged One shining forth above the horizon of the will of God, the Sovereign, the Truth, the Resplendent. Unstop, then, the ear of thine heart that thou mayest hearken unto the speech of the Divine Lote-Tree [*sidratu'l-muntahā*] that hath been raised up in truth by God, the Almighty, the Beneficent. Verily, this Tree, notwithstanding the things that befell it by reason of thy cruelty and of the transgressions of such as are like thee, calleth aloud and summoneth all men unto the *sadratu'l-muntaha* and the Supreme Horizon (Bahā'u'llāh 1988:84).

Sometimes both symbols are used in conjunction, as demonstrated in the colophon to his most noted doctrinal work, the *Kitāb-i-Īqān* (*The Book of Certitude*):

Revealed [*al-manzūl*] by the “Ba” and the “Ha” [ie. “Bahā”].

Peace be upon him that inclineth his ear unto

the melody of the Mystic Bird [*al-warqā'*] calling from the *sidratu'l-muntahā* (Bahā'u'llāh 1970:257)

Bahā'u'llāh often resorted to prophetic symbology to communicate his theophanic claims, particularly early in his ministry when he did not feel that the Bābī community and the wider Muslim populace were capable of sustaining the weight of an explicit claim to prophethood. It is evident that ‘Abdu'l-Bahā’ still employed this same practice in relating his father’s claims to prominent Muslims, as evinced by the use of these same symbols in his letter to Muḥammad ‘Abduh. ‘Abdu'l-Bahā’ further writes of the “universal and

transcendent Reality” (“*al-ḥaqīqa al-kulliyya al-fā’iqa*”) which is raised up in the “august station,” (*al-maqām al-mahmūd*) and “described as the Outstretched Shadow in the Perspicuous Day [*al-yawm al-mashūd*].” In common Muslim parlance, the “Perspicuous Day” is a clear reference to the Day of Judgment when the soul will be asked to stand before God and account for its deeds (see Qur’ān 11:103). In Bahā’ī eschatology, however, the appearance of the “universal and transcendent reality,” or the Messenger of God, in the “august station” is the Day of Judgment; once again further evidence that ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ was attempting to subtly communicate his father’s claims to prophethood. Read in light of the foregoing, the mundane introduction is now transformed into a poetic elucidation, however hidden, of his father’s theophanic claims.

In the main body of the text, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ continues to hint at his father’s identification with the Semitic prophets through repeated Qur’ānic allusions to the revelatory experience. For instance, ‘Abduh is instructed to proceed to the “Vale of Towa,” the site where God spoke to Moses (see Qur’ān 20:12, 79:16), where he will hear the guidance from God emanating from the Burning Bush.

Towards the end of the letter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ reaffirms that nothing but a new revelation from God is capable of regenerating the Muslim community. As noted above, this too is done subtly. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ first counsels ‘Abduh to continue on his path of reform, but leaves the choice of the method to ‘Abduh. However, he then proceeds to inform ‘Abduh that only a divine power (*quwwat malakūtiyya ilāhiyya*) is capable of regenerating Islam. Given his background and the repeated allusions to Bahā’u’llāh’s claims to a new revelation, there is little doubt as to the source of the “divine power” in the mind of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’.

Granted, ‘Abduh may not have understood ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’’s allusions, despite his religious training and appreciation for veiled messages (see Malcolm Kerr’s *Islamic Reform* 1966:105, 111). Unfortunately, ‘Abduh’s reply to the letter is missing, so it is impossible to gauge his response. Ridā’ mentions that he possesses several letters from ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ to his teacher, which might clarify his reaction, but he fails to reproduce them in the voluminous history of his mentor (Ridā’ 1931:930). A letter written by ‘Abduh to

‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ on the 29<sup>th</sup> of Muḥarram, 1305 (October 17, 1887) may explain why Ridā’ did not publish their correspondence (see Appendix II for full translation).

In the letter, ‘Abduh’s admiration of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ is evident. He begins with the standard praise of Muhammad, his family, and his companions. But he also addresses ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ as the “perfect master” (*al-mawlā al-kāmil*) and the “proof that the latter generation surpasses its forebears” (*ḥujjat al-awākhir ‘alā al-awā’il*). As further evidence of his high esteem for ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’, he also addresses him as the “spirit of peace” (*rūḥ as-salām*) and admits that words cannot contain the depth of his feeling for him. While it could be argued that he was merely engaging in hyperbole (not uncommon in letters of the time), this level of praise in ‘Abduh’s writings was unusual. For example, compare the letter with the opening passages from a letter addressed to the English clergyman Isaac Taylor. As a member of Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s secret society for the reconciliation of the three major monotheistic faiths, Taylor was impressed with the Shaykh’s presentation of Islam and wrote several articles in English newspapers in praise of the religion (much to the chagrin of his fellow missionaries in the Middle East). Reciprocally, ‘Abduh so respected Taylor for his courage and insight that he had one of his articles translated and published in the journal *Thamarāt al-Funūn*. The letter is useful for comparison since there are several parallels with his letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’: 1) ‘Abduh did not agree with many of Taylor’s beliefs, 2) he admired Taylor, and 3) the letter was written in Beirut around the same time that ‘Abduh wrote to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’. Below are excerpts from his letter to Taylor that are similar in purpose to phrases found in his letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’, but different in tone:

This is my letter to him who is inspired with truth and speaks with sincerity the revered, respected minister, Isaac Taylor.... News has reached us of that which you presented to the religious assembly in the city of Lūndrā [London?] concerning the religion of Islam. If it is true, then light is radiating from within your words by which discernment knows true insight and to which the eyes of luminous minds are inclined (Ridā’ 1906:513).

‘Abduh continues to extol Taylor’s efforts to dispel misconceptions about Islam, but nowhere in the letter does his praise for the minister reach the level of that found in his letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’. Perhaps a more worthwhile comparison would be with one of his letters to a close, unidentified friend written in Beirut, which Riḍā’ includes in his collection of ‘Abduh’s “letters of friendship” (*risā’iluhu al-widādiyya*) published in the second volume of the history of his teacher (1906):

The affection for you in our heart blazes forth by your radiance and the praise in our speech is inspired by your perfection and the respect in our breast is upraised by your splendor (*Bahā’uka*). Time can never dissolve our friendship nor create its like. We preserve it from the need for renewal and growth. No communication increases it and no delay weakens it. Truly, your place in [our] soul is a manifestation of your bounty (*tajallī faḍlika*) and represents your loftiness and nobility. This immortality bequeaths everlastingness to the souls and eternity in the self-sacrifice of the spirits.

A letter has arrived from you divulging the secret of love and unfolding concealed friendship. In it is a demonstration of your emotion due that which we feel and your sympathy on account of our bereavement. We are already informed of the news [in the letter] and the fate of that which we decided, but we thank you for the favor of [your] letter and your friendliness. May God redeem your debt as recompense for your fidelity (Riḍā’ 1906:531–2)

Like ‘Abduh’s letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’, this missive is filled with Sufi imagery and hyperbolic expressions of friendship. At the very least, therefore, his letter to the Bahā’ī leader should be read in a similar light. Still, ‘Abduh’s praise of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ finds few parallels, save in his letters to Afghānī. Below is Elie Kedourie’s partial translation of one of his letters to his mentor that was written in 1883 during ‘Abduh’s first sojourn in Beirut, some portions of which were edited out of Riḍā’’s reproduction of the letter in his *Ta’rīkh* (Kedourie 1966:66):

My Exalted Lord (*mawlāy al-mu’azzam*), whom God preserve and second in his purpose! Would that I knew

what to write to you. You know what is in my soul, as you know what is in yours. You have made us with your hands, invested our matter with its perfect form [and created us in the best shape]. Would that I knew what to write to you. Through you have we known ourselves, through you have we known you, through you have we known the whole universe. Your knowledge of us is, as will not be hidden from you, a necessary knowledge; it is the knowledge you have of yourself, your confidence in your power and will; from you have we issued and to you, to you do we return.

I have been endowed by you with a wisdom which enables me to change inclinations, impart rationality to reason, overcome great obstacles, and control the innermost thoughts of men. I have been given by you a will so powerful as to move the immovable, deal blows to the greatest of obstacles, and remain firm in the right until truth is satisfied. I used to imagine that my power [through your power] was limitless and my capacity infinite, but lo, the days have brought me endless surprises. I have taken up the pen to show you that in my soul with which you are more than myself familiar, but I have found myself defeated, with a paralyzed heart, a trembling hand, quaking limbs and distracted thoughts, [your] mind mastering me as though, O my lord (*mawlāyy*), you have given me a kind of power which, to indicate the potency of your dominion (*sultān*), you have made to extend over individuals, but you excepted from its sway that which relates to communication with you, and the approach to your majestic abode (*ilā maqāmika al-jalīl*) (Ridā' 1925: 599–603).

Evidence that 'Abduh was not typically prone to this type of extreme mystical praise in the openings of his letters can be deduced by the reaction of Rashīd Ridā' to the above quoted letter to Afghānī. In his introduction to the letter, Ridā' writes:

It is the strangest (*aghrab*) of his letters, or rather odd (*ash- shādh*) in that he describes the Sayyid with words that resemble those of the Sufīs and the proponents of existential monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) (Ridā' 1925: 599).

In his letter to the Bahā'ī leader, 'Abduh repeatedly speaks of his longing (*shawqī*) for 'Abdu'l-Bahā', indicating that their friendship was already well established by the time the letter was written. Further, he notes the receipt of a letter from 'Abdu'l-Bahā'. Finally, and most significantly, 'Abduh expresses his desire to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahā' in Haifa due to his "need to be illumined by your light" [*hājatī laka li-istidā'a bi-nūrikum*].

Although 'Abduh ends the letter by expressing his desire to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahā' in "Akkā, there is no substantial evidence that he was able to carry out his wish. There is, however, evidence that he visited Palestine during his second exile in Beirut and he may have stopped in 'Akkā to visit the prisoner. In a letter to Isaac Taylor, 'Abduh mentions his trip to Jerusalem:

I was recently in Jerusalem for a visit of the holy lands, which the three major religions revere. Here, the visitor is struck by the impression that the true religion is as a mighty tree from which numerous branches have spread out. The presence of differing leaves and branch networks in no way detracts from its unity of kind and species. It is correct that its resemblance in fruit, both in color and flavor, is condensed in the religion of Islam, which has been nourished by its roots and veins. Islam is its epitome, and the objective of its growth. For [Islam] affirms the whole and magnifies all while calling to unity and union. For this is the destiny of all creatures though their differences have attained a number, which is beyond all limits ('Abduh, 1972:365; translated by Kuhn, 1993:50).

As further corroboration, Shakīb Arslān wrote that 'Abduh not only visited Jerusalem, but also Damascus, Tarablus, Sidon, and Ba'labek (Ridā' 1931:405). It is quite possible, then, that he was able to carry out his desire.

### ***Concealed History***

Although I have established that a friendship existed between Muḥammad 'Abduh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā' and that the Muftī may have known more about the movement than he related to Ridā', the influence of the two men upon one another is still an open question. Further, the course of their friendship after 'Abduh's return to Egypt

remains unresolved due to a dearth of information. There is a lengthy article on the Bābī and Bahā'ī movements published in *al-Ahrām* on June 18, 1896 that is attributed to 'Abduh in a Bahā'ī source (Qab'īn 1932:122–123), although no name is attached. Further, the author of the article particularly focuses on challenges to 'Abdu'l-Bahā's leadership of the Bahā'ī community by members of his family, a tactic Ridā' would later employ in his anti-Bahā'ī polemic. Based on this, I am inclined to credit Ridā', rather than 'Abduh, with authorship of the article.

Sometime during this same period, 'Abdu'l-Bahā' wrote a letter to a Hājji Mīrzā Hasan-i Khurāsānī that included a message to 'Abduh ('Abdu'l-Bahā' c. 1903). Although the letter was undated, it seems to have been written between 1898 (the establishment of *al-Manār*) and 1905 ('Abduh's death). The most significant period of Bahā'ī persecutions in Yazd during this period of time took place in 1903, so we can tentatively fix this date to the letter. In the letter, 'Abdu'l-Bahā' mentions that Ridā' and Shaykh 'Alī Yūsuf (1863–1913), published a report in their respective journals concerning the murder of 200 Bahā'īs in the Persian city of Yazd.

Ridā's journal, *al-Manār* ("lighthouse" or "minaret") began its publication on March 17, 1898. 'Abduh chose its name and outlined its policies. In 1901, Ridā' began publishing installments of the "Tafsīr al-Manār," a well-known Qur'ānic commentary composed by 'Abduh and Ridā'. The latter continued to write and publish the *tafsīr* after 'Abduh's death. Although Ridā' maintained that the ideas expressed in the commentary were 'Abduh's, it is difficult to discern the demarcation between 'Abduh and Ridā'. (as-Sāwī 1954:38). *Al-Mu'ayyad* was a daily paper established by Shaykh 'Alī Yūsuf in Cairo in 1889. In 1900, it published six articles of 'Abduh refuting the arguments put forward by French Cabinet Minister, Gabriel Hanotaux, who had published an article in the "Journal de Paris" in which he wrote at length on the "fatalistic Muslim mentality" (as-Sāwī 1954:37).

In their articles concerning the murder of the Bahā'īs in Yazd, Ridā' and 'Alī Yūsuf contended that they were killed for slandering the prophets of the Qur'ān. 'Abdu'l-Bahā' maintained that 'Abduh was well aware of the Bahā'īs willingness to sacrifice themselves for



the prophets and, therefore, would never have consented to the dissemination of the erroneous articles. Further, he contended that they were only published on account of ‘Abduh’s absence from Egypt during a trip overseas. Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahā expressed his trust in the Mufti’s continuing goodwill, the exact nature of ‘Abduh’s feelings towards the Bahā’īs at the end of his life is unknown.

The reason that the matter is shrouded in mystery is related to the handling of a letter from ‘Abduh to Leo Tolstoy that was written in Arabic at the end of his life. Murād Wahba has recently written an article in Arabic detailing the correspondence between the two men. He relates that ‘Abduh’s letter was relayed to Tolstoy by an English Orientalist named “S. K. Kūkūrīl” on May 2, 1904. This is probably Sydney Cockerell who served ‘Abduh’s English acquaintance and fellow political intriguer Wilfred Blunt as a private secretary for two years and then became director of the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge. “Kūkūrīl” wrote Tolstoy and told him that he and ‘Abduh had a number of mutual interests. He also attached a copy of ‘Abduh’s letter rendered into English by Wilfrid Blunt’s wife, Anne. Wahba managed to recover Tolstoy’s copy of the Arabic letter and discovered a postscript that was omitted from ‘Uthmān Amīn’s 1955 and 1965 printings of his book *Muhammad ‘Abdu, Essai sur ses Idées Philosophiques et Religieuses* and from an English translation appended by Blunt to the second volume of his *Diaries*: “If you prefer to respond, O wise one, it can be in French, as it is the only European language I know” (Wahba 1994:121). Despite Wahba’s claims to have discovered the postscript, however, Muḥammad ‘Imārah had already produced a copy of the complete original (1972, vol. 1:269).

Wahba contends that the deletion of the postscript was intentional (“*muta‘ammad*”), as it would indicate the existence of a response from Tolstoy in French containing information that would tarnish ‘Abduh’s reputation in the Middle East as an “orthodox” Muslim. Indeed, Wahba reproduces Tolstoy’s response written in French on May 12, 1904 in which he praised the reformist efforts of ‘Abduh and asked about the secret of creation. As mentioned in the introduction, Tolstoy ended the letter by asking the question: “What

do you know of the Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh?" (for information on Tolstoy's interest in the Bahā'i religion see Stendardo 1985).

Internal evidence in the letters suggests that Rashīd Ridā' worked assiduously to ensure that the question remained unanswered; an action that is commensurate with the pattern demonstrated in the forgoing. It seems that he deleted the postscript when he first published the letter in his *Ta'rīkh*, twenty years prior to Amīn (Ridā', 1925:623–624). But this in itself is proof of little more than editorial efficiency.

Following the reproduction of the letter in the biography of his mentor, however, Ridā' adds a short message from 'Abduh to Tolstoy, although it is unclear if the original was in French or Arabic. It is apparently an excerpt from a second letter, as it ends abruptly and contains no signature or traditional ending of "*as-salām*," as found in the first letter. Ridā', however, does not indicate that it is part of a larger letter, merely labeling it "He also wrote to him [Tolstoy]." The subject of the extract is quite interesting, as it is written in response to Tolstoy's question regarding the secret of creation:

O sinless spirit! You have proceeded from an exalted station to the terrestrial world and assumed the corporeal form known as Tolstoy. My might [*qawīyy*] is in you, joined to your spirit in its belief [*mabda'*]. Your bodily needs have not kept you from that which you have aspired to. You have not been afflicted with that which hath befallen most of the people due to their obliviousness to that which separates them from the world of light. You were continuing to contemplate it with contemplation upon contemplation and [your] insight is returning to it time and again. In this regard, you have inquired about the secret of creation [*sirr fitra*]. You have comprehended that the person is created in order to know and then to do and not created to be ignorant, idle and negligent (Ridā' 1925:624).

Given the brevity of the response, the abrupt ending, the absence of an "*as-salām*" indicating a termination of the main body of the letter, and the subject matter, I believe this letter to be an incomplete excerpt from 'Abduh's response to Tolstoy's letter. From the preceding pages, one might deduce the reasons for Ridā''s

deletion of the rest of the letter, as it was likely a response to Tolstoy's second query concerning the Bahā'ī religion. The exact nature of 'Abduh's feelings towards the Bahā'ī teachings at the end of his life, therefore, was known only to Ridā'. If it was negative, it is hard to believe that Ridā' would have left it unpublished, as he tried assiduously to distance his teacher from the Bahā'īs. Although one can conclude that 'Abduh's final thoughts on the Bahā'ī teachings may have been positive, their exact nature remains hidden, either destroyed or part of a larger collection of 'Abduh's correspondence with 'Abdu'l-Bahā' left unpublished and in private hands.

What is clear, however, is the danger of giving too much credence to Ridā's narrative, which was subject to distortion when it suited his ideological agenda. As demonstrated, the friendship between 'Abduh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā' was far more meaningful than portrayed by Ridā', as it was based upon mutual admiration for *orthopraxis* not *orthodoxy*. Perhaps with the discovery of additional communication between the two men, a more nuanced intellectual history of 'Abduh can be composed.

Although the existence of a strong friendship has been established, however, the intellectual implications of this relationship still need more exploration. In his earlier article, Cole suggested two such avenues of investigation that rely on the establishment of an intellectual genealogy connecting the two men (Cole 1981:9). In addition to his earlier view that 'Abdu'l-Bahā' may have influenced 'Abduh's arguments on polygamy, Cole also suggests that his ideas on "progressive revelation" and the fundamental unity of religions gleaned from his father may have also influenced 'Abduh. In his most recent book, however, Cole has inexplicably altered his previous conclusion concerning polygamy (Cole 1998:181).

Intellectual genealogies, however, are notoriously difficult to prove, as attempts to construct the relationships of cause and effect, or even adequately encapsulate the thought of the subject are often frustrated by the biases of the author and by inconclusive evidence. The study of 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim intellectuals living in the Middle East is further complicated by several factors that limited the expression of their thought, including the presence of totalitarian

regimes, foreign control, and a dominant Muslim discourse often hostile to foreign knowledge and religious innovation. Indeed, one might well question the feasibility of writing standard biographies given these constraints.

Perhaps a more fruitful enterprise would be to consider the social problems both men grappled with and the divergent paths they trod in search of solutions. After all, ‘Abduh called for a return to the rational elements of early Islam, as embodied in the Mu‘tazilite school, while ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’ stressed the need for a new revelation from God. Further, it was their mutual pursuit of religious reform that caused them to cross paths in the first place and develop a friendship that transcended the boundaries of orthodoxy. The answers produced by the two men are still relevant, as the Islam articulated by the former and his rational apologetics have been appropriated by a number of Muslim thinkers, while the teachings of the latter hold a pivotal position in the corpus of writings that guide one of the fastest growing religious groups in the world.

## APPENDIX I

### *‘Abdu’l-Bahā’'s Letter to Muḥammad ‘Abduh , c. 1885 AD*

He is God!

Praise be to God Who hath caused the tongue of the Mystic Dove [*al-warqā’*] to speak with the best of words in the Garden of the All-Merciful upon the boughs with the most wondrous of melodies. Whereupon the holy, detached and pure realities, upon which were imprinted the luminous rays from the sun of Truth and which blazed with the kindled fire from the Divine Lote-Tree [*as-sidra ar-rabbāniyya*] in the reality of man, were stirred, gladdened, quickened and attracted by its fragrances. At this, they rejoiced with praise and glorification in commemorating their Lord, the Mighty, and the Powerful. And they loosed their tongues and proclaimed, “Praise be the One who hath caused it to speak of God’s praise in the garden of existence with the psalms of the family of David and Who hath taught it His wisdom and His mysteries and Who hath made it the repository of His inspiration and the dawning-place of His lights and the dayspring of His signs. All necks are brought low through the

power of His utterance and are made to bow through the appearance of His proof.” I give praise and salutations to the universal and transcendent Reality, subsisting from the beginning of existence, which is inundating [*al-fā’ida*] all existent things, raised up in the august station [*al-maqām al-mahmūd*], described as the Outstretched Shadow [see Qur’ān 56:30] in the Perspicuous Day, the greatest means and mightiest instrument [of the grace of God]. The blessings of God be upon Him and His family in this world and the next.

O learned man of distinction endowed with deep-rooted nobility!

If you desire to ascend unto the highest apex in the circle of existence, then you must have keen perception in this majestic age, so that you might behold the light of guidance shining above the exalted horizon: “the earth shall shine with the light of her Lord [39:69].” Seek, then, to inhale the fragrances of God, which are verily wafting from the meads of holiness, the Garden of Paradise. Direct your footsteps to the Vale of Towa [see Qur’ān, 20:12, 79:16] with a heart attracted to the heavenly realm, and you will find the Most Great Guidance in the kindled fire in the Blessed Tree that speaks upon Mount Sinai. Draw forth then your hand, white and glistening with lights, amongst the concourse of the righteous.

By your life, O erudite one! For a discerning critic like yourself, it is seemly to ascend unto the highest sphere of the heavens. Remove this tattered and threadbare garment, don the vestments of sanctity, spread out the wings of inner vision and betake yourself to the Kingdom of the All-Merciful and hearken unto the melodies of the birds of holiness perched upon the highest boughs of the Lote-Tree beyond which there is no passing. By your life! They give life to the moldering bone and restore the breasts that have been dilated through the love of God; and for them is a “great fortune” [Qur’ān 41:35]. Abandon this mortal life and all its concerns, which are destined to pass into extinction. I swear by your Lord, the Most High! They are dreams, nay, vain imaginings in the sight of those possessed of understanding. Rather, true life is the life of the spirit, adorned with virtues whose lamp is lit and shines forth in the Kingdom of creation. “God is to be likened to whatever is loftiest [Qur’ān, 16:60],” so if you desire a goodly life, scatter the seeds of

wisdom in good, pure earth, in order that they may yield for you in every grain seven ears of blessed corn [See Qur'ān 2:216]. If you wish to rear a structure in the contingent world, erect a majestic edifice, strongly buttressed, its foundation immovable in the centre-most point of attraction, the lowest nadir, and raise up its chambers in the sublimest zenith of the ether. Quaff the exquisite wine of mystic meanings from the chalice in the Realm on High, the Centre of the Circle of the Most Mighty Bestowal, the Pole of the sphere of the Most Great Bounty and the Dawning-place of guidance and the Dayspring of the lights of your Lord, the Most Exalted.

I swear by my longing for you! It was naught but the attraction of your love and devotion and the ardor your friendship that prompted this discourse. I have the highest hopes for you, the benefits of which my hand is incapable of obtaining. Reproach me not for having removed the veil from the Face of the bestowal of your Lord, “for not to any shall the gifts of thy Lord be denied” [Qur'ān 17:20].

Contemplate with penetrating vision the bygone centuries; and their circumstances; and their traces and conditions; and their luminaries; and the marvels that occurred and their wondrous conditions; and the profound secret they contained and the variations among the schools of thought; and the different philosophies current amongst its leaders; and the diverse tastes of its luminaries. Truly, the annals of our predecessors are a reminder and a lesson to those who come after. Choose for yourself whatsoever you desire. What you need is something that is possessed of a firmer foundation, clearer elucidation, a greater proof, a more powerful sovereignty, a brighter light, a greater happiness, a sweeter subsistence, a deeper longing, a swifter remedy, a sounder method, a more radiant lamp, a greater gift, and a more perfect bestowal nay that is more potent in its life-force and more redeeming in spirit for the body of mankind. By your life! Whosoever is against it, the Face of God is abiding, the Possessor of majesty and honor. And if you are able to remain in the shelter of the Divine Countenance, then you will be preserved from extinction, attain immortality, and become radiant in the manifest horizon with a light illuminating the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth. The panoply of acceptance is rolled up and the cover of

oblivion will be spread out. And the floods leave nothing behind except traces. And the rich will come down from the palaces to the graves and the throes of death will seize them and regrets will pile upon them. It is too late to escape. No sound will you hear from them or any stir [see Qur'ān 19:98]. And as for the dross, it will pass away uselessly. And as for that which benefits the people, it remains hidden. The former generations are for us a clear example.

And if God were to assist you with correct judgment and forceful sagacity, consider that which will return this noble community to its first beginning and exalted rank. I swear by the raising of its standard, the sun of its appearance, the light of its guidance and the foundation of its structure! Nothing save a divine power can renew its tattered garment, bring forth its profusely growing root and raise it up from the decay of its downfall and the “*hā*” of its decline [*hubūṭihā*] to the “*mīm*” of its station [*markazihā*] and the summit of its *Mi'rāj*. Verily, that is the remedy that is the remedy, that is the remedy and peace be upon whosoever shall follow the guidance.

## APPENDIX II

### *Muhammad 'Abduh 's Letter to 'Abdu'l-Bahā', 29 of Muḥarram, 1305 (October 17, 1887)*

Perfect master and energetic savant, proof that the latter generation surpasses its forebears, may God support you. Praise be to God, the beginning of perfection and its end, and peace and blessings be upon the essence of existence [Muhammad] and his wisdom and his family and the inheritors of his exalted station and his companions, those who preserve his guidance and are the lodestars of his command.

Peace be upon your lofty station, O spirit of peace. And beneath your beauty, O high-minded one, the rulers bow their heads. If God could make concrete form to encapsulate the mystic spirit or expression to relate the conditions of the inmost heart, I would tell you the best of stories and recount unto you the grandest of narratives so that I might express my longing for you and lament your absence. However, no narrative can encapsulate the feelings I

have for you in my soul and no story can relate the place I hold for you in my heart. I trust that the brilliance of your vision will bring them to light and I am content that the radiance of your soul will illumine them.

My longing for you is the longing of souls for perfection and my preoccupation with you is the preoccupation of hearts with their aspirations. But what am I to do? Obstacles are erected and barriers force me to remain far from you. When I returned to Beirut, I found a letter [*kitāb*] from you awaiting me that contained an abundance of chapters and sections. In it, you clothed me in the beauty of your thoughts and placed the collars of your grace around my neck by the descent of your good pleasure. I am nothing like what you mentioned. Rather, you illumined your own attributes by mentioning these things. That is how God uplifts the perfect people, so they become even more exalted, and how He teaches them through his grace, so they become humble. May God increase your loftiness and exaltedness and upraise your high rank, sinless [*‘isma*] and invincible.

As for coming to ‘Akkā, my longing for you draws me unto it and my need to be illumined by your light impels me to come. I will make every effort and do whatever is in my power to realize this desire. I ask God to facilitate it and not to make us satisfied with hope over actual measures. In your love, He bestows a blessing upon me and with nearness He eliminates my sorrow at your remoteness. He, verily, is the Lord of the truthful and the Protector of the pure in heart.

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